A PASSION FOR FREEDOM
The Story of Kisanin Jaggi Devi



Deepti Priya Mehrotra

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Janpath, New Delhi 110 001

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Jaggi Devi, 1989

Inaugural

This story, is the first in a series steered by the IGNCA, to record the unheard voices of women, their discontent, their dissidence, and their passionate engagement with the trying issues of life and livelihood. It is an attempt to restore the unrecorded voices of people who fought for freedom but were left outside history. This monograph tells us about Jaggi Devi who lived for the world, *jag ke liye*; who let the author into her house and her heart and travelled with her. This is the oral evidence of her thorny road to freedom in the early twentieth century.

Jaggi Devi's is a story of courage that blossomed in the midst of famine, epidemic and penury. Deprivation and oppression stalked her and her fellow travellers, and darkened their thresholds. She played a leading role in the peasant movement in Avadh against the draconian exactions and rack-renting by landlord and their British patrons. She led women of Kisanin Sabhas into satyagraha and steeled them to conquer fear of torture. The dictionary on the folklore of this saga of struggle is enriched, in the author's narrative, by words like 'murdafaroshi' or 'sale of the corpse', the inhuman practice of eviction of the wife and children of dead tenants from their land; exaction of levies like 'motorwan' for maintenance of cars by landlords;'nai-dhobi-band', or the strike of menial services and 'panchayati cow' proposed by the Kisanin Sabha, to provide milk to children.

The story is poignant with tragic memories: the death of the seven year old child of Jaggi Devi and the samadhi build in his memory; the death of thakurain Amraji Devi during her movement of protest, and her son going mad; sexual assault and

the penalty of standing on hot pots in the sun, imposed on women who refused begar or unpaid and forced labor; of the '*anath abalaon ki pukar*', the cry of helpless and abandoned women; of moving with Sundari Devi in the jungle, without food or shelter, to escape police harassment; the eviction of her mother Dhiraji, her mentor, from her land on the death of Dhiraji's husband, when Dhiraji was only 25; the death of Jaggi Devi's husband, Baba Ramchandra, her guru in the peasant struggle, when Jaggi Devi was only 35.

The narrative is laced with an ambivalence, intrinsic to the psyche of Indian women. Jaggi Devi was a Kurmi lady married to an older Brahmin peasant leader, who married her formally at the time of salt satyagraha. She spoke not only of her reservations about a 'roti-beti' relationship outside the caste, but also about the dissolution of caste barriers in the movement, and explained her own intercaste marriage as a concession to the compulsions of the movement. She considered her children, born of her intercaste marriage, to be Brahmins and chose Brahmin husbands for her daughters. She spoke of her becoming 'gurmukh', of turning her face towards the guru, her husband. And yet, as her husband was arrested, being pregnant she was denied the right to court imprisonment. She smarted at Gandhiji's injunction denying this right, an injunction she considered paternalistic. In a pamphlet dripping with sarcasm, titled 'Mata Shatru, Pita Bairi', Mother Enemy, Father Adversary', she castigated polygamy, polyandry and repeated child marriages of women, and quipped that even cows were taken to bulls only on attaining maturity.

Jaggi Devi's fight for freedom continued beyond 1947, when India won political freedom. To her and her people, swaraj was more an economic than political swaraj, which would transform the exploitative land relations. She welcomed the police, the government and the army that one could now call one's own after independence, but continued to feel deprived of social or

economic freedom. To her disappointment, though zamindari was abolished, land reform did not come. She fought for women's education, but found only idle talk. She hoped for an end to poverty, but for her son born in 1948, whom she named Swatantra Bharat, there was no work. Her mind was full, but her belly was not, and if there was a bite to eat there was no milk to drink. She spoke of Nehru's involvement in the Avadh peasant struggle, or the big head and long arms of Gandhi, of Indira killed by her own men. She regretfully witnessed the agrarian movement getting co-opted into the mainstream national movement and losing its energy. She visited the District Magistrate and the Prime Minister to advise them about ways to end the continuing exploitation in free India. She went on relentlessly fighting against consumerism, casteism and exploitation, for food, shelter, clothes and schools, for employment through spinning, and the care of aged cattle.

With her own inimitable, wry, humour, Jaggi Devi commented on freedom. The bull had been harnessed, but it had strayed off the path to the grass. Not having been to prison, she was treated as a widow of a freedom fighter when it came to for benefits. She was 'Jaggi Mata' for the youth of the nation, whom she called her children. She lived alone in poverty, served by devoted sewaks, on the move, talking, working for freedom from hunger and oppression. She died apparently insane, raving about a freedom that was still to be won. Her epitaph was her moving bhajan about the sufferings of Sita, which did not end with her death. At the end of this story, we are left with the startling memory of Jaggi Devi's intense, vibrant, laughing personality, of her iron grip, her talon like fingers, and of her electrifying presence that charged the dull space around and inside us, with crackling tension.

Dr Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty

Preface

It is an honour to present before the scholars and readers, the story of Kisanin Jaggi Devi and her passion for freedom, published under the programme 'Narivada: Gender, Culture and Civilization Network', launched by the IGNCA under the aegis of Ministry of Culture. Narivada is the culmination of various exploratory efforts of IGNCA on the subject of gender and culture. In 2003, the IGNCA organized an international seminar in collaboration with Utkal University at Bhubaneshwar on the theme 'Reframing Gender in the Context of Culture of India'. At the end of the seminar, the erudite group of participants felt that there is no recognition whatsoever on the positive role that our culture can play in rebuilding a national profile for a culturally rooted paradigm of empowerment of women. Given the extraordinary cultural resources of the IGNCA, it was appropriate that the center should take up the challenges of bringing the women's question and the multi-faceted aspects of women's culture, center-stage in the contemporary discourse of women's empowerment. While in the past, andocentric presuppositions have been a stumbling bloc to 'paradigm building'; today women themselves are both the subjects, as well as agents, of scholarly study and analysis. This has created a new space for indigenous cultural studies and the need to voice their experiences.

Narivada's endeavours are centered on shifting the emphasis of gender research from reductionism to a more holistic frame. Narivada aims to promote a constructive dialogue and critical reflection on the relationship of gender, culture and civilization with a view to give legitimacy and place to the rich cultural

frames, to diverse communities and regions; and to give adequate opportunity to the silent and suppressed voices of women.

One of the main projects supported by IGNCA and the Ministry of Culture is to document the "Oral History of Women about the Making of the Indian Nation". This project explores the alternative oral history or 'her-stories' of nationalism of women who were participants, onlookers, or receivers of stories of the freedom movement from the older generation of women.

The monograph on Jaggi Devi, whose whole life was devoted to the cause of justice and freedom, brings to us a voice from the grassroots. It has been argued by many sensitive feminist writers that epistemologies and theories of knowledge that dominate our discourse are based on distorted notions of objectivity. Women scholars have outlined the problems associated with quantitative theorizing based on the methods of natural science. They have emphasized the immediacy of women's conscious experiences. New methods have emerged out of consciousness-raising sessions organized at the grassroots level. In these sessions, the oral histories of women define their own construction of gender. Jaggi Devi's story, as the author explains, "is a contribution to writing history 'from below'. It explores a space typically forgotten or neglected by mainstream historiography – the space occupied by a struggling dalit woman. She was neglected because of a double bias in historiography: a class bias as well as an andocentric one".

Some contemporary women believe that collective feminism in India was born in the 'first wave feminism' in the 1970s. This is untrue. The oral popular history of such women matriots may prove otherwise. Cutting across class and geographical divides, the book charts the life of a lone crusader. Such instances push the boundaries of feminism further back into time. The narrative raises wider questions about methodological and empirical issues

related to the study of women's culture. It is about the art of life: the ethical and moral values that give meaning to existence, and a quest for a personal freedom.

Dr Madhu Khanna
Project Director
NĀRĪVĀDA:
Gender, Culture & Civilization Network
IGNCA



Acknowledgements

I thank Jaggi of course, for all she shared with me. Writing this is partial repayment of the enormous debt I owe her: a deepened understanding of history and humanity. I recall Jaggi reminding me, "Baba fought with the pen." With twinkling eyes she encourages me to write through the night, saying, "You have knowledge. You are a child who belongs to the whole world."

I am grateful to Gurmilan and Lalli in Daudpur Kunda village, and Divya and Alok Bharti in Pratapgarh, who provided me with a home in each place.

Sundara Devi, Ram Akbal, Ram Avadh, Ram Bahadur Singh, Budhni Devi, Kedar and several others villagers were extremely hospitable during my wanderings in the district, and warm and frank in sharing with me their time, homes, memories and thoughts. Mr B. M. Pandey, DM Pratapgarh and Mr Varma, tehsildar, Patti, went out of their way to help my research. I would like to thank all these people.

Thanks to Praveen Kumar, who briefly accompanied me during my second trip to Daudpur, for the several invaluable photographs he took. The photos are very special: they seem to capture and preserve a little bit of the magic that was Jaggi.

Thanks to my daughter Sunandita for cheerfully surviving my impossibly long work hours (and shortened patience). By sheer luck, my mother Mrs Preetvanti Mehrotra visited Delhi over three crucial days and expertly copy-edited the manuscript in the pre-dawn hours. Lola Mathai provided the much-needed finishing touches.

I bear a debt of gratitude to my mother, and my father Dr Ram Narain Mehrotra, for they were the ones who taught me in the first place to value people, ideas, and books. They nurtured, or allowed, a certain free, wild and obstinate streak in me, which enabled the reaching out and connecting with somebody as 'divinely mad' as Jaggi undoubtedly was!

Dr Deepti Priya Mehrotra

Introduction: A Voice from the Grassroots

"We walked through fifty-two districts – barefoot... We would tell the villagers about freedom.... They were longing for freedom, a fire was burning in their hearts!"

– Jaggi Devi, 1988[1]

Jaggi Devi: An Unheard Voice

I first learnt of the existence of Jaggi Devi in 1986 while reading for my M.Phil thesis (which was on women's roles in peasant movements in pre-Independence U.P.[2]). An article referred to her as 'Srimati Jaggi', the Kurmi woman whom peasant leader Baba Ramchandra married.[3] I felt curious about this woman. What would she have experienced – a peasant woman married to the acknowledged leader of the Avadh agrarian movement? Did she herself participate in the powerful struggles of that time?

I grew interested in meeting Jaggi, to explore her memories. I had a hunch that she might have a great deal to share. Original manuscripts – the 'Baba Ram Chandra papers' stored in Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teenmurti, New Delhi[4] – provided tantalizing glimpses of women's active participation. Jaggi Devi had been the original custodian of these manuscripts. From the papers, it was clear that local women raised some specific women's issues during, within and alongside the concerted movements.

In 1988 I decided to undertake – quite independently – a field trip to Jaggi Devi's village. By then I had completed my M.Phil and started research for a Ph.d[5]. Meeting Jaggi did not formally fit into any of these projects. The decision to meet her was

prompted by my growing interest in critical feminist and 'subaltern' research[6]. This in turn was influenced by my engagement in contemporary women's (and related progressive) movements. Seeking Jaggi out was a personal quest too – to connect with those who had struggled in the past, hear their unheard voices, and document their undocumented stories.

The First Trip

In May 1988, I boarded a train to Pratapgarh. Several people had warned me I would be vulnerable to harrassment – but I reached safe and sound. A bus from Pratapgarh to Patti, then a shared jeep, took me right up to Jaggi's village Daudpur Kunda. To my enormous relief, Jaggi was there! She was unwell, lying on a string cot, unable to eat anything since some days. She took me in at once, with great affection, as if she had long been waiting for somebody like me to turn up at her doorstep.

I had written to her, but received no reply. She explained, "I received your letter. Everyday I think about it. But how could I invite you to my mud hut? It is a big responsibility to look after a guest. How could I ask you to eat our food, live in our hut? That is why I did not reply...."

But I was most comfortable in her mud hut, shaded by a protective pipal tree. Gurmilan, her self-appointed helper, served fresh papaya and bananas plucked from their trees. I still remember the exquisite taste of *nimoona* – a preparation of fresh peas – that her daughter Lalli prepared at Jaggi's behest.

Appointed: Her Scribe

The present monograph is based on three field trips during 1988-89. Within this period Jaggi too visited Delhi, including a daylong visit to my home in Delhi University.

Jaggi was deeply aware of the historical significance of experiences such as hers, and keen to communicate to everybody in the country. Her affection towards me included an element of relief: she felt she could lighten her burden somewhat, by appointing me her scribe. The third time I went to Daudpur, she exclaimed, "You have come, *beti* now I am at peace. I do not read or write, but I have found the correct pen. I am happy. I have not studied. But I have lived. Yes, I have lived my life!"

During the same trip she took me to several adjoining villages – Rure, Kasaipur, Devsara, Pehra, Labeda, Bhavpur, Kehla, Behta and Bisar... to meet fellow-activists and the families of now-dead activists. To acquaint me with their history became a mission with her.

Small, dark, with vibrant eyes and energetic gestures, Jaggi was intense, shrewd, witty and acutely intelligent. Her company was heady, her personality compelling. As she made a point, she would grip your wrist to make sure you listen, her fingers like talons. Spry and birdlike, she cackled with laughter. She was soft and tender, but at the same absolutely tough, unsparing. I want you to see this woman in your mind's eye, to feel her presence. She was warm, full-blooded. A tremendous excitement filled the space around her.

History 'From Below'

This story is a contribution to writing history 'from below'. It explores a space typically forgotten or neglected by mainstream historiography – the space occupied by a struggling dalit woman. She was neglected because of a double bias in historiography: a class bias as well as an androcentric one.

Her vitality helped me understand the spirit of the Indian struggle for national independence – in a way different from, and more

powerful than, what history books had taught me. Jaggi's life spanned an era of dramatic changes, and she herself was passionately involved in the big and small of political movement. Through it all, she managed on meagre resources, struggling to survive.

She and her ilk fought for swaraj – the country's freedom – and won it. But despite their lifelong sacrifices, it was others who plucked the fruits of the tree called freedom.

Personal Connections and Class Contradictions

Jaggi Devi took part in collective struggles for female education in the 1930s, and tried to educate her daughters Lalita and Vijayalakshmi (in the 1940s). However, circumstances rendered it impossible for the girls to attend school. Years later Jaggi said to me, "I wasn't educated. But I have educated you."

When introducing me to others in her area Jaggi said, "This is my daughter. I could not educate Lalli or Vijaya. But I have educated this daughter." Her meaning was clear. She'd fought for Swaraj, education and basic survival rights. But others were reaping the rich harvest which people like her had sown. If I received education, it was due to the struggles waged by her, and others like her.

Jaggi articulated the deep injustice of post-Independence socio-economic arrangements, yet retained a vision broad enough to encompass all of us, whatever our class and caste. Often she was sad and bitter, yet at other times she spoke as a wise and loving 'Mata' (which is what most people called her in her later years), considering all the young of the country as her own children. With an air of joyous satisfaction, she would comment, "I have sons and daughters, many of them. I didn't study, but they have studied."

Understanding Jaggi

I tried looking at Jaggi through her own terms and categories. I trained my focus on the attempt to *see her as she saw herself.* She would assert, "We threw out the British regime. Now the police is ours, the army is ours. The people are our people." And wryly she would add, "Those who fought for freedom all live in mud huts. Apart from these huts, they have nothing."

Her daughter Lalli said to me, "When you return to Delhi, tell them how Jaggi Devi lives. She has neither enough to eat nor enough to wear. In the rains the house gets flooded. If rains are scanty the crops don't grow."[7]

But Jaggi said, "I do not talk of my sorrow. I talk of the sorrows of the world. I have suffered a lot. But I am fine. I have everything: enough to eat (only I do not get milk!), this dhoti to wear, this hut to live in. What do I lack? See, even if I do not eat, my mind is full of so much...."

The Personal and the Political

What went into making this particular human being, with her unique trajectory through life? How did a woman like Jaggi constitute herself as a political subject? How did the personal interact with the political and public? Where were the ruptures, continuities and disjunctions? Where did the unacceptable, the socially tabooed emotion or viewpoint, lurk, how and when did it show up – a mere glimpse, maybe?

From the perspective of a more conventional historiography, Jaggi would be studied as the wife of Baba Ram Chandra. But the role of 'wife' – or 'widow' – could in no way define or contain Jaggi. In a starkly patriarchal ethos, she refused to be classified by her family roles, or as a victim.

She was resolute in the presentation of her self: as a fighter, a rebel and a leader. A thinker, doer and activist in her own right, she could certainly provide inspiration to those of us who seek roots and sources to help nurture our visions and struggles today.

Freedom Fighters and the 'Free' Nation-State

Peasant movements in Avadh sprang from local roots and remained relatively autonomous, converging at points with Congress-led nationalist campaigns.

Jaggi later recalled, "Jawaharlal began his politics here. Here for the first time he understood heat and sweat. He saw how the people of the country live, how they fight. He made a speech at Sai River, thousands thronged to hear him. His feet were delicate so he had to be picked up and carried for several miles, up to Saifabad. Acchaibar Singh carried him – Ram Akbal's father[8]. When he was served food, he thought the *rotis* were ash – they were of black grain, cooked on a wood stove, in a poor person's house..."

In his autobiography, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote about his first visit to Avadh in June 1920 at the behest of a group of peasants: 'That visit was a revelation to me.... I was filled with shame and sorrow, sorrow at my own easy-going and comfortable life and our petty politics of the city which ignored this vast multitude of semi-naked sons and daughters of India.... They were in miserable rags, men and women, but their faces were full of excitement and their eyes glistened.' He noted, 'progressive pauperisation of the peasantry had been going on for a long time'; they were now rising up 'partly due to the leadership of a remarkable person, Ramchandra, Baba Ramchandra as he was called.'[9]

'It was not surprising', continued Nehru, 'that a big agrarian agitation should develop in Oudh. What was surprising to me

then was that this should develop quite spontaneously without any city help or intervention of politicians and the like. The agrarian movement was entirely separate from the Congress.... What amazed me still more was our total ignorance in the cities of this great agrarian movement.'

In the 1930s, peasants from Avadh partly joined Congress-led nationalist campaigns. By the early '40s this convergence was expressed in massive participation in anti-war individual satyagrahas and the Quit India movement. Thousands of ordinary peasants, including women, courted arrest and many spent years in Rigorous Imprisonment at Naini, Rae Bareli, Allahabad or other jails.

Jaggi took me to meet the families of some of these freedom fighters – poverty-stricken men and women, lines of anxiety criss-crossing weather-beaten faces. Wearily they pulled out certificates in which the Indian nation acknowledged their elders' contributions to freeing the country from foreign yoke. Some certificates were dog-eared, others insect-bitten: all were grimy. These families of freedom fighters live in penury and ignominy. Nearly six decades after Independence, they remain part of a 'vast multitude of semi-naked sons and daughters of India'. They struggle to make ends meet, and live hand to mouth. Nor do their eyes today glisten with excitement or hope. Their faces express blank despair, for there is no longer any cohesive movement promising a better future[10].

The elite seldom care to recall the historical contributions made by families such as these. Obviously history means different things to different people, and those who have gained more than they sacrificed have a stake in selective amnesia.

Writing Up

Conventional history has focused on the elite. Subaltern studies and feminist historiography seek to change this, and set the balance right. They interrogate class-caste-gender prejudices and biases, and recognise the subjectivity and agency of subaltern rebels[11]. Feminist scholarship in India is reclaiming women as actors and doers – seeking to bridge enormous gaps in knowledge and understanding[12].

It is now being accepted that living sources are often as important as congealed ones – the papers and documents. Oral history researchers draw out memories, elicit images and emotions: sometimes dipping into deep waters that lay untouched for decades.



Jaggi Devi: Listening to her own voice: Outside her home, Daudpur Kunda village

Meeting Jaggi was to encounter history in the flesh. Lack of formal training as a historian didn't deter me from listening, respecting, asking, observing, taking the leap of imagination and thought that is essential for *understanding*. Her words, relevant documents, and the words of others have enabled me to stitch together the story of her life.

Chapter I

CHILDHOOD

"My parents named me `Jaggi' so I would work for the world (jag ke liye)."

– Jaggi Devi

Birth

Jaggi was born, around 1917, in a peasant family. Her father's name was Kashi Kurmi, and mother's Dhiraji. Kashi and Dhiraji were tenant farmers. They eked out a living through daylong labor in the zamindar's fields.

Kashi and Dhiraji lived in Para village of Pratapgarh district. Pratapgarh was in Avadh (or Oudh), which was part of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (U.P.) U.P. was a huge province, covering roughly the same area as the present-day states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal.

Kashi and Dhiraji named their daughter 'Jaggi' – an unusual name. The name meant 'jag ke liye, or 'for the world'. Kashi Kurmi and Dhiraji were activists by temperament, and part of the early ferment towards building a Kisan Sabha in Avadh. They called their child Jaggi because they hoped she too would work for the common good. The name, carefully chosen, signified the depth of their commitment to public work. The baby of course was blissfully unaware of the enormous expectations placed on her frail shoulders.

Agrarian Unrest

Around the time of Jaggi's birth, local peasant leaders had begun to mobilise popular support around local grievances. The main contradiction in Avadh was between proprietary classes – talukdars, zamindars, pukhtadars – and poor peasants, mostly tenants-at-will. As poor tenants-at-will, Kashi Kurmi and Dhiraji were subject to all the deprivations of their class.

Exploitative rent enhancement, rack-renting and eviction were rampant. *Begar* (forced labour) and exorbitant rates of interest for crisis loans were the order of the day. Poor tenants had to pay *nazranas* (tributes or illegal cesses): '*motorwan*' to help the zamindar or talukdar maintain his car, '*hathiana*' to help maintain his elephants, and so on. They had to pay *abwabs* – portions of every kind of produce, be it grain, straw, rope, vegetables, milk, ghee, goats, condiments or cotton. Any person belonging to Chamar, Kori, Kurmi, Ahir or Lodh castes who received an advance sum of money from a rich farmer or moneylender became his bonded serf for life.

There is evidence of low-key agitation against exploitative rents, illegal cesses and evictions as far back as the late nineteenth century. Dacoity and grain thefts were a defence against starvation and simultaneously a mode of protest.

The talukdari system prevalent in Avadh was a settlement with large landholders (zamindars and talukdars), who paid revenue to the state, collecting rent from their tenants.

Since 1857, large landholders were wooed by the British, dubbed 'natural leaders' of the people and allowed every leniency in order to enrich themselves and enhance their power. This was of course at the expense of the poor peasantry. 'Taking the United Provinces at large, the landownership structure can be

described... as a pyramid with an extremely broad base but tapering rapidly to a narrow elite pinnacle.'[13]

Poor peasants were crushed under the excessive burden. They grew increasingly indebteded over the years, their meagre earnings dwindling to nothing in times of flood or famine. During the colonial era, Indian peasants were drawn into the global economy 'as objects of imperialism, that is as super-exploited people who provided surplus product not only directly to landlords, moneylenders, merchants and financiers, but also indirectly to the imperialist nations.'[14]

Kashi and Dhiraji grew up experiencing the excesses of an empire and its local collaborators. Their blood boiled at every instance of exploitation and brutality they witnessed or heard of. Influential local leaders like Baba Ram Chandar, Jhinguri Singh, Acchaibar Singh and Sahdev Singh were actively mobilising peasants who were discontented. Young Kashi Kurmi joined in. With his fiery spirit and ready energy, he quickly became a fledgling leader. Dhiraji was strongly supportive.

In different parts of India, many local and regional agrarian movements, directed against rural hierarchies and the British regime, took place during mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. In fact 'popular mobilisation in the colonial period was realized in its most comprehensive form in peasant uprisings.'[15]

Intensifying Peasant Distress

During 1900-20, the rate of eviction of tenants in U.P. increased by over 100 percent – reaching the figure of 37,844 suits for ejectment in 1921[16]. Wholesale prices during the same period went up by 158 percent. The prices of essential commodities like salt, cotton, kerosene and food grains rose enormously.

Unprotected tenants were adversely affected since they had to buy a portion of their subsistence requirements from the market[17]. Economic distress was acute in the Avadh region since all the tenants here were non-occupancy tenants, who were frequently ejected.

Indebtedness, disease, hunger and deprivation stalked the land. Those who bore the yoke of intense poverty and exploitation were sometimes driven to selling their own daughters, to stave off starvation deaths for the entire family. 'Kanya vikraya' (sale of young daughter) was often the last resort for tenants in trouble[18].

The end of the 1914-18 War witnessed an intensified scarcity crisis. To make matters worse, the 1918 monsoon was disastrous. Famine and epidemics raged across the land. Plague, cholera and influenza spread like wildfire in the countryside, finding easy prey in communities that, being semi-starved and weak, had lost their immunity. Influenza alone killed some 2 million people in the province[19].

Father's Death

Kashi Kurmi contracted influenza. All the care Dhiraji bestowed upon him proved ineffective. He suffered a few brief days of high fever, remedies applied proved ineffective – and then came the inevitable, tragic end.

Thus it came to transpire that Kashi Kurmi died when his daughter, Jaggi, was just an infant. A stunned Dhiraji, relatives, fellow-peasants and fellow-activists mourned the loss. Kashi Kurmi was in the prime of his life when he passed away, aged barely 20 or 25.

Dhiraji's Plight

No tragedy could have been worse for Dhiraji. The young woman, suddenly widowed, not only lost a companion but also her home and livelihood. The tenancy was in Kashi's name. Like other women, Dhiraji had no independent rights in land or other fixed assets. She knew that, after the death of her husband, she would lose her simple abode as well.

Dhiraji was summarily evicted from the land in Para village. Eviction of a dead tenant's wife and children was a common, cruel practice, known as '*murdafaroshi*' (literally 'selling the corpse'). Many women lost their means of subsistence upon the death of the husbands and were converted, at one fell stroke, into beggars and paupers.

Dhiraji parents-in-laws lived in the same village, and were sympathetic to her plight. She moved in with them. The family owned a tiny patch of land in Para, but it was insufficient for subsistence needs. Kashi's brothers had to work on others' land in order to survive. As a widow, Dhiraji faced an additional edge of insecurity: a feeling that she and her daughter were living on sufferance, under a permanent obligation. Her brothers-in-law were wary that in time she might demand her portion of land. She toiled round the clock, working in the fields and in the household.

Dhiraji was a simple village woman – but then is any village woman really that 'simple'? Since childhood, she had learnt to cope with adversities. As she faced the major crisis of her life, her survival instincts rose to the fore. Over the years she became a formidable figure – resilient, calm and tough.

As Jaggi grew, she picked up the skills needed for survival in the countryside, from her mother and doubtless from other elders

too. She helped with housework and various agricultural operations. She loved to graze the cattle. Jaggi enjoyed the open countryside – the beauty of red palash flowers, grassy commons, pools of translucent water, and wispy white clouds in a blue sky.

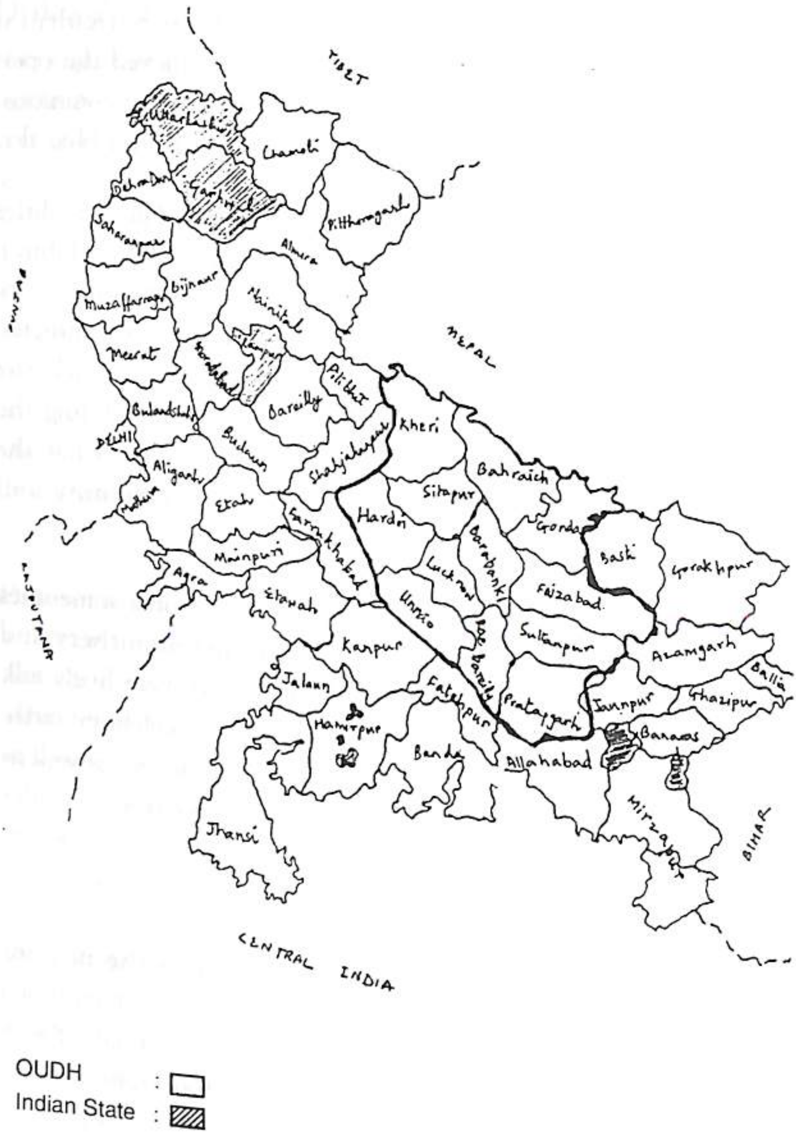
However everything was not idyllic in this haven! Harsh realities impinged upon the daily lives of Jaggi and her mother. Dhiraji had no relief from relentless hard work. A stray unkind remark or rude comment cut her sharply sometimes, especially if directed against her daughter. But she accepted the rough with the smooth. She concentrated on caring for Jaggi and fulfilling the responsibilities and tasks expected of her. She valued what she had, and taught Jaggi the same qualities of equanimity and endurance.

Dhiraji would take Jaggi and go to her parents' home sometimes – a village in Jaunpur district. With her grandmothers and mother, Jaggi learnt songs and stories too. These were lively folk songs, seasonal *kajris* and *horis*, and *sohars* sung to celebrate birth. She grew up steeped in the ordinary life of the village, as well as another distinct ethos – the world of peasant politics.

Dhiraji's Activism

Dhiraji consciousness was already imbued with the peasant movement. Despite some opposition at home, she was determined to remain engaged in movement activities. The Avadh Kisan Sabha was established in 1918 with its headquarters at Rure village. Dhiraji had often frequently gone with Kashi to Rure to participate in meetings and discussions. She continued attending the weekly meetings at Rure, as regularly as she could manage.

As the Kisan Sabha picked up momentum, Dhiraji's commitment grew even stronger. She developed a sharp understanding, and



Map of The United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, up to 1947

was ready to participate whenever possible. Her family members, initially resistant, gradually allowed her more leeway. Elder peasant leaders vouched for her – they considered her an asset to the movement. Her own family elders were basically supportive of peasant struggle.

Often Jaggi would stay overnight at Rure, in the homes of other activists. She was welcome in many homes. As the widow of a highly respected activist, and an activist herself, she was accorded due respect. Others too grieved with her, and felt a sense of compassion.

Thus Jaggi, as she grew up, felt at home in various places. Apart from her family homes, she had many playmates in the homes of other activists. She was particularly happy in the house of Jhinguri Singh, a senior activist who lived with his large family in Rure. Dhiraji found herself easily absorbed within the community of women in that home. She felt completely safe: there was no threat. They were generous – the older women would often say that accommodating one more person would not stretch their budgets at all. Over the years, this became a home away from home for Dhiraji and Jaggi.

Dhiraji proved her worth in the peasant struggle. She participated in meetings, gave wise counsel, passed messages, mobilised other women and engaged in support-work like cooking for activist meetings. For her, this involvement was a powerful anchor. It was a source of immense satisfaction in an otherwise sad life.

Chapter II

TURBULENT TIMES

"Our elders, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers fought for freedom."

– Jaggi Devi

Avadh Kisan Sabha

The Avadh Kisan Sabha, established in 1918, was reported to have some 100,000 registered members by 1920[20]. In Pratapgarh district alone, some 585 panchayats, established by the peasants, functioned actively and independently.

Towards the end of 1919, in Pratapgarh district there was a partial strike of menial services, at many sites – '*nai-dhobi band*' (strike by barbers, washermen etc). The strikes, organised on the lines of village caste panchayats, were quite successful.[21]

In June 1920, on his first visit to Pratapgarh, Nehru 'found the whole countryside afire with enthusiasm and full of a strange excitement. Enormous gatherings would take place at the briefest notice by word of mouth. One village would communicate with another, and the second with the third, and so on, and presently whole villages would empty out, and all over the fields there would be men and women and children on the march to the meeting-place. Or, more swiftly still, the cry of *Sita Ram* – Sita Ra-a-a-m – would fill the air, and travel far in all directions and be echoed back from other villages, and then people would come streaming out or even running as fast as they could....'[22]

Participation of Women and Children

Jaggi – aged 4 or 5 years old – was witness to this turbulent era. Dhiraji was one among the large groups of peasants that gathered for such meetings and demonstrations. Jaggi learnt, from an early age, to participate in popular political gatherings. Though she attended no school, this was the kind of education she did receive! Her mother's excitement and involvement influenced her a great deal. Thousands around her were caught up with the struggle; so much so that for little Jaggi, it became the natural way to be.

Being a mother of young children did not preclude women's participation in the peasant movement. One such active participant was Budhni Devi of Bisar village. A few years older than Dhiraji, she was married to Kasi. Decades later (in 1989) Budhni Devi, then reputed to be a 100 years old, recalled, "I went with Kasi for innumerable *sabhas* and meetings. I went to Rure, by the banks of the Sarju, Kanpur, and so many places. I would take the children along. I had three sons and two daughters. I would leave my whole house and remain outside for days, the children with me. Jaggi was just a child at that time. My son was older than her. She came with Dhiraji for meetings and sabhas."[23]

Militancy and Repression

The Kisan Sabha-led peasant movement advanced rapidly, spreading significantly in Pratapgarh, Rae Bareli and Faizabad districts, and establishing important footholds in other districts including Sultanpur, Sitapur and Barabanki. Its prominent leaders included Baba Ram Chandar, Jhinguri Singh, Sahdev Singh, Kedar Nath, Bhagwandin, Kashdin and Ayodhya. In September 1920, Baba Ram Chandar was arrested. Some 40 to 50,000 peasants gathered – including large numbers of women –

and surrounded Pratapgarh jail to press for Baba Ram Chandar's release. They were successful.

In November 1920 in Faizabad, landlords retaliated brutally to try and suppress peasant resistance: 'Homes were looted, women molested and stripped of their clothes and ornaments, and men taken away. The extent of the looting can be judged from the fact that it carried on for three hours. By the time the landlord's men finished, the villages were in a bad way.' The local administration denied the charge of looting, but admitted that 'it is of course conceivably possible that some of these (police) men may have ill-treated the women'.[24]

In December 1920 the first Avadh Kisan Congress was held at Ayodhya, in Faizabad district. Some 80 to 100,000 peasants were reported to have turned up.[25] According to the Baba Ram Chandar papers, 'Lakhs of peasants, forming groups, began walking out from all the districts. The men and women of Avadh wished to fulfil their commitment. On the way talukdars' servants and government officials issued many threats and bribes, but not one was successful. On trains and on bullock-carts, people began thronging to Ayodhya in groups of thousands, from the first day itself. Upto the last day, kisans and kisanins kept arriving.... Some aged kisanins were absolutely exhausted.' The people carried banners demanding an end to talukdari oppression. Priests opened the doors of temples, and Hindus and Muslims slept together there.

During the conference, Ram Chandar dressed like a prisoner bound with ropes, a noose dramatically hanging over his head. He described the peasantry as being similarly bound with ropes of bondage to 'government, talukdars and capitalists.'[26] He undid the ropes only when the peasantry assured him that they would unite to bring an end to their triple bondage. Satya Devi,

a peasant woman, spoke on behalf of women. She assured the gathering that women would participate in the movement.

After the conference people started leaving for their villages. They wanted to travel ticketless, but were stopped from doing so. So about one thousand kisans and kisanins lay down on the railway tracks, launching a satyagraha: 'Kisans and kisanins, children, young women and young men, old people and widows, women whose babies suckled milk from their breasts, all lay down on the railway lines, in hundreds. They were not deterred even by hot water showers from rail engines and police lathi charge.'[27] The authorities ultimately allowed the peasants to have their way and travel ticket-less.

'In January 1921 the peasants of Avadh burst onto the national stage.'[28] Peasants held demonstrations at Fursatganj and Munshiganj bazars in Rae Bareli district. Sizeable groups of peasants – 3,000 to 10,000 in number – looted the bazars and attacked talukdars' crops and property.[29] The police resorted to firing. In village Sehgaon Paschimgaon, Rae Bareli district, peasants engaged in battle with the talukdar's men. Women of the village pelted stones from their housetops, on the policemen who supported the talukdar's side.

In Faizabad district in January 1921 gangs of men, women and children ranging from 500 to 1000 looted the houses of small zamindars, patwaris, Banias, Sunars and large cultivators in Baskhari and Jehangirganj police circles. The gangs consisted largely of landless labourers and small tenants. Men would conduct the looting, and women carry off the booty[30].

During this movement, there were some instances of peasants (both men and women) abusing and humiliating upper caste women. There were some oppressive women talukdars, for instance Chabiraj Kunwar of Pratapgarh.

The Kisan Sabha developed a parallel administration in the form of village panchayats. At several places, activists attempted to force the release of arrested leaders and fellow activists.

In January 1921 a number of leaders were arrested and lodged in Rae Bareli jail. Large peasant contingents gathered for a mass demonstration, but were stopped by the police and military, who opened fire on the unarmed kisans. Several men were killed in the firing, setting of a reign of terror for every prominent kisan worker or member of a panchayat.

Government had decided to crush the movement. Arrests, long jail sentences and other methods of repression were used. Nehru reported that 'Firing on kisans took place on two occasions in Rae Bareli district...and then began, what was much worse, a reign of terror for every prominent kisan worker or member of a panchayat.'[31] All this ultimately broke the back of the movement.

In March 1921 Butler, then Governer of U.P., observed, 'You have seen in three districts in southern Oudh the beginnings of something like revolution.'[32] However, Congress leaders now vigorously denounced the movement, for it had taken to forms of agitation that they did not approve of.

Nehru retained his admiration of the peasants, whom he observed on sporadic visits to Pratapgarh district: 'The down-trodden kisan began to gain a new confidence in himself and walked straighter with head up.... The talukdars were frightened and on the defensive and the provincial government promised an amendment of the Oudh Tenancy Law.'[33]

The movement did result in improved laws for the tenants of Avadh. But this in no way brought their exploitation to an end.

Throughout the '20s, peasant agitation continued, though on a lower key.

'Kisanin Sabhas'

Kisanins – that is, women peasants – were making efforts at self-organisation, around some specific women's issues. The following resolutions were passed at a meeting of kisanins in 1925[34], held under the chairpersonship of one Jai Kumari ji:

' – A panchayati cow should be kept in each village for providing milk to the small children of the village.

– After the death of her husband if a woman is able to prove her marriage she should get all rights (of inheritance). If there is no wife the son or daughter should get the full rights.... The rights should then go in order of priority, to father's lineage; mother's lineage; the gurukul; the national fund.'

The minutes of the meeting further continue:

'1) We kisanins will hold meetings in every village for the fulfilment of these objectives.

2) Women should give a fee of one anna per year as subscribtion.

3) In every village we will make a women's panchayat.

4) In some villages we will hold meetings to deal with our own problems and demand that the government pass laws to help solve these problems.'

Kisanin Sabhas remained relatively small and subsidiary bodies and probably had little staying power or continuity. But the very idea and initiative of a separate formation by women peasants is, for its times, remarkable.

Dhiraji and young Jaggi would, in all likelihood, have been part of these efforts at self-organisation. Clearly there would have been substantial activity around these meetings, and the issues and demands raised. It would have entailed a fair amount of activism on the part of sundry women – which would have influenced the growing girl.

Jaggi Grows Up

As a child Jaggi was enthralled by all the excitement of the fast-growing peasant movement. She would listen in, eyes flashing in her dark attractive face. She picked up hundreds of bits and pieces of information, brought in by various comrades on a daily basis. She heard people describe conditions in different parts of Avadh, and was aghast at the reports of inhuman exploitation – *murdafaroshi*, exorbitant cesses and levies, rack-renting and *begar*.

As she grew into a young woman, her head was full of facts about the conditions of peasants, and the necessity for struggle. She would hover around Kisan Sabha meetings, listening to the lively discussions and sometimes contributing her ideas.

Dhiraji – and the peasant movement as such – were largely responsible for moulding Jaggi into the rebel she became. These provided the foundation and created a pattern that Jaggi later built upon, in her own way. A powerful role model for the young girl, Dhiraji was a woman of exceptional courage and determination, who blazed new trails rather than follow the beaten track.

Chapter III

MARRIAGE AND DESH-SEVA

"I was twelve when I took the pledge to serve the country. Baba and I took a pledge for `desh-seva'. This was the most important part of our marriage ceremony."

– Jaggi Devi

Dhiraji's Dilemma

Dhiraji worried about Jaggi's future. It was believed that girls should be married, and living in their marital families, by the time they attained puberty. But Jaggi had grown up in an extraordinary ethos that shaped her into a most unusual young woman. Dhiraji realized her daughter would be dissatisfied with a 'normal' household: working in the fields, cooking, cleaning, bearing and rearing children, with her husband and in-laws laying down the rules. She would find it stifling – and perhaps intolerable. Jaggi's name meant 'for the world', and her upbringing ensured that active participation in public work was essential to her being.

Dhiraji had no land. She could offer no dowry. As she mulled over the problem, Dhiraji realized that matters might work out well if Jaggi married another activist. An idea began to take shape....

Baba Ram Chandar and Jaggi

Around the same time, Baba Ram Chandar indicated an interest in Jaggi. He was a Brahman, and much older than Jaggi.

Tall and attractive, he was originally from Maharashtra, had been to Fiji as an indentured labourer, before returning to India and wandering into Avadh. Though his name was Shridhar Balwant Jodhpurkar, he became known here as 'Baba Ram Chandar'. He worked relentlessly, mobilising people for struggles. A pro-peasant senior government officer, V.N. Mehta, advised him to marry locally, since landlords constantly charged Ram Chandar with being an 'outsider' instigating peasants in Pratapgarh. This advice played about within him. Of late, he was feeling weary. He felt he wanted to have a home and family of his own. He wanted a companion who would understand his involvement in the movement, and be supportive.

The match between Jaggi and Baba Ram Chandra was arranged. His opponents used the liaison as an excuse to discredit the movement – describing it as 'ghar baithal liya' (literally, he 'kept' her in his house). Yet the marriage was acceptable within their immediate community of fellow-activists, and a wider ambit of ordinary village-folk.

What Jaggi Felt

Jaggi and Baba Ram Chandar married in 1930, when the Salt Satyagraha was on at Dandi. Jaggi and Ram Chandar took a solemn pledge to devote themselves, throughout their lives, to the service of the country. This was the most important part of their wedding ceremony. Some mantras were recited around the sacred fire, the bride and bridegroom exchanged flower garlands, and took the pledge for public service amidst a *baraat* of fellow comrades, Jaggi's relatives, and other neighbours.

For Jaggi, her marriage was as much about serving this serious, scholarly, every-busy husband of hers, as it was about service to the nation. She set herself to both the tasks, with a will.

The pledge for 'desh-seva' formed a strong, enduring bond between them. It was inevitable that Jaggi's personal and political lives would remain closely intertwined, forever.

What young Jaggi felt about marrying a man many years senior to her, we will never know. He had been a constant presence in her life – as an elder, a leader. Others told her she was lucky to have a man like him – and she partially accepted this. Perhaps, secretly, she was rather attracted to him. Certainly she was not actively unhappy.

Decades later, recalling her feelings at the time, Jaggi said simply, crisply, "*Main Gurmukh ho gai*" – "I turned my face towards my Guru". More than that, she would not say.

'Speaking the Husband's Name'

It took Jaggi time to adjust, and become comfortable in this intimate relationship. Baba Ram Chandra was of course a patriarch – though a reflective and benevolent one. He was affectionate and quite considerate, while she did her best to please him. He tried to mellow some of the hierarchies prevalent within marriage. As part of this effort, he urged Jaggi to speak out his name. Speaking the husband's name was taboo in north Indian society. Jaggi became converted to the cause – and all her life urged other women too to break this taboo. This symbolised an effort to induce a shift towards greater equity within marital relationships.

Baba Ram Chandar was well informed and wrote tirelessly: pamphlets, petitions and booklets. He taught Jaggi to write her name. She was eager to learn a skill so useful, which few women – or men – possessed in her society. However, she never went beyond signing her name.

There were problems and contradictions in their marriage, which smoothed out gradually over the years. He was inconsistent in his efforts to democratise the marital relationship. Despite Ram Chandar's explicit advocacy of equality between the sexes, he did not always live up to this ideal. Jaggi sometimes felt slighted and resentful, while he may have felt insecure. She once recalled, "Baba thought he has brought me from a low caste to a high status. He didn't let me study further. He didn't trust me. He thought I might run away while he was out."



Jaggi at her son Govind Narain's samadhi in Kasaipur village. Govind Narain died at the age of 7 in 1938

They often faced the charge '*Baba ne ghar baithal liya*', that is that Baba Ram Chandra simply brought Jaggi into his house, without a proper marriage. Although they had formally married, yet inter-caste marriages were looked upon contemptuously. They faced the charge boldly. Yet, deep within her, Jaggi herself disapproved of inter-caste marriages. She justified her marriage only on the ground that "it happened during the movement time." She did not think such marriages should become common. On principle she maintained that *roti-beti* relationships should

be kept within caste boundaries. She said, years later, "What we did was within the time of the struggle. So it was done. But it should not be done."

The movement and the concept of desh-seva framed their marriage in more ways than one. Baba Ram Chandar kept moving constantly from place to place, holding meetings. Jaggi began to travel with him. For the next many years, she too traveled through hundreds of villages. Initially her focus was on looking after him, seeing to his comforts and needs. She also took part in meetings. She would especially meet women, and mobilise them to join the struggle.

Home and Children

After their marriage Jaggi and Baba Ram Chandar lived in a rented room in Pratapgarh city. Jaggi recalled that they paid two 'silver' coins as rent per month. The Kisan Sabha office was close by.

The year after their marriage, Jaggi gave birth to a baby boy. They named him Govind Narain. Dhiraji moved in to look after Jaggi and the baby. Thus this family broke another taboo: in north India it is taboo for parents to stay in their daughter's marital home. They are not supposed to drink even a glass of water there.

Dhiraji's presence was welcome. Jaggi and Ram Chandar requested her to stay on, and she readily agreed. She had grown attached to the baby, and had no great desire to return to Para, to live with her in-laws. Jaggi's bond with her mother grew even stronger. The older woman's presence enabled Jaggi to continue as an activist. Dhiraji became the mainstay at home: she kept the household fires burning, while her daughter and son-in-law devoted their energies to building up the peasant movement. As a routine, they would be away for days on end.

When Govind Narain was five years old, the family moved to Devsara. Village life suited them much more than the hustle and bustle of urban life. Dhiraji was devoted to her little grandson. His parents too doted upon him. But about a year or two after the move to Devsara, Govind Narain died. He contracted fever, shut his eyes and started panting, saying 'Ma, give me water to drink'. Within twenty-four hours he passed away. He was 7 years old when he died. Jaggi, Ram Chandar and Dhiraji grieved for him. They built a samadhi for him, in Kasaipur village.

During their travels, one day Ram Chandar and Jaggi passed by a scenic spot at the periphery of Daudpur village. They were entranced by its calm atmosphere: a lotus pond, palash trees and open land stretching to the horizon. A sadhu Baba Ganga Das who lived in an adjoining temple had prophesied that a holy man would come, he would transform the world. The landowner, Bisesar Baks, gifted two bighas of land to Baba Ram Chandar. It was recorded in Dhiraji's name.

Within a few months the family built a humble mud hut and moved to Daudpur. This place provided some stability to their itinerant lives. A year later, Jaggi gave birth to a daughter. They called her Lalita. This was around the year 1938/39.

Chapter IV

KISANIN ACTIVISM

"Zamindars and talukdars... were butchers! Butchers, I tell you! ...They would take away young women from homes. She could be of any caste – Brahmani, Thakurain, Kurmi, Harijan... Nobody could say anything....

"It is because of our fight that we are all free today. Now the police is ours, the platoon is ours. The roads are ours. Sit on the bed! – Now we do not need to sit on the ground...."

– Jaggi Devi

Traveling and Mobilising

Jaggi recalled, "I went with Baba to Kanhapur, Lucknow, Bareli, Unnao.... We walked through the fifty-two districts – barefoot! We would go together, our whole group would walk for miles on end. We were in one village one day, in another the next. We would tell the villagers about freedom. They would wait for us and gather in large numbers.... They were longing for freedom, a fire was burning in their hearts!"

The core team of peasant activists urged people to fight to end exploitation at the hands of zamindars, talukdars and the government. They popularised the message of swaraj that the Congress had sent out. To them, swaraj meant primarily a transformation in land relations. The worldwide Depression of 1928 had left its mark on the countryside, and poor peasants, in a heightened state of distress, responded to the call for Civil Disobedience. The Congress struck roots in U.P., and the Avadh

peasant movement took up the call for non-payment of taxes and illegal cesses.

Later Jaggi recalled, "When Jawaharlal's mother died, we took our little son with us and went to Allahabad. Jawaharlal told Jhinguri Singh, 'Devi ji has gone but she has left the nation's work in our hands – yours and mine!'... In Kanpur I heard Sarojini Naidu speak."

Women Activists

During the 1930s a number of women were active in the Avadh peasant movement. Apart from Jaggi, these included Sampaati, Laali, Abhilakhi, Amraji Devi and Sundara Devi. They moved about with activist men's groups, sometimes in groups of women, and oftentimes alone. Years later Abhilakhi's daughter-in-law Uttara Devi related, "My mother-in-law would sling her bag over her shoulder, hold aloft the Congress flag, and go out from village to village to spread the message of Swaraj. The family lived in Atraura village. She would wander about all day, like this. She was well known."[35] Abhilakhi's husband was not active in the peasant movement, but did not try to stop his wife. Sampaati's grandson Ram Samujh said, "My Nani was a freedom fighter. We got a pension while she was alive, but nothing after her death."[36] Laali's real name was Musammat Putta, but peasants called her 'Laali' due to her militant attitude[37]. She was from a Chamar family and her husband worked as an agricultural labourer, while she was a Kisan Sabha whole-timer.

Budhni Devi – active since the early '20s – remarked, "I had a mind of my own. I didn't come under the sway of Baba Ram Chandar. Jaggi came under his control. If one thinks for oneself, one cannot be controlled." Obviously Budhni had some differences with other movement leaders, though she wouldn't tell us what these differences were[38].

Jaggi told us of Amraji Devi of Bisar, "She was a Thakurain. She went for meetings and sabhas. She would protest at the Rai Saheb's gates in Haripur. She died at Haripur court. Her son Kuldip went mad and was sent to the asylum in Agra; he died there. Her daughter was married in Rewa. She was a sadhuain, she would eat here and there, live in the sangat."

In Bisar village, Dhanraji, daughter-in-law of Gayadin, wife of Gopal Lal, recalled, "We had many movement meetings in our house. My mother-in-law would cook and serve. She did a lot for the movement in this way. I helped her in this. She did not sit in at the meetings. Women were too shy to do so."

Said Jaggi regarding such behind-the-scenes participation by women, "Baba would sit and eat at everybody's house, and the women would serve him and other activists. He sat at Chamar, Pasi and Musalman homes, and ate food, drank water.... Once we were walking, it was cold weather. We sat where we'd reached, at a Harijan's house. They gave us a warm quilt, and fresh hot food. We would see the intention, the sentiment – that was the important thing."

Jagganath Pradhan of Behta village[39] related, "We would go to meetings. My father would go. We went really far. My mother wouldn't go. She served at home. If Baba came, she would serve him milk."

Kisanin Panchayat

During the 1930s a Kisanin Sabha was formed, with Jaggi Devi as its leader. It had a large number of peasant women in it, including several wives of peasant leaders. These belonged to different castes. The Kisanin Panchayat aimed to fight the grievances faced by kisanins as women; to fight the grievances faced as peasants and

agricultural labourers; and to undertake political mobilization for the national movement.[40] The Kisanin Panchayat was like a women's wing of the Praja Sangh, organized by Baba Ram Chandar in an effort to forge unity among peasantry belonging to different strata.

Members of the Kisanin Panchayat had to sign a pledge that they would work for the following:

'a) After the husband's death, we should have full right over the holding, without making any payment. For five years there should be no eviction.

b) Women from peasant families should not be forced to work under threat of lathis, dandas, chains and so on.

c) Labourers should get their full wages.'[41]

Exploitation of Women Agricultural Workers

Women activists raised some issues specific to women. A pamphlet entitled 'Anath Abalaon ki Pukar'[42] (A Call from Abandoned Powerless Women'), laid bare the conditions of women agricultural labourers:

'1) We are beaten with lathis and dandas.

2) We are made to stand on *handis* (earthern pots) in the harsh sun and watched with lustful eyes.

3) We are crushed under the burden of *begar*. If we do not do *begar* we are beaten with lathis. Our heads are smashed open. (*Hamara sar phora jaata hai*)

4) Upon the death of the husband we are ejected from the house, land, orchard, grove, well and pond; we are unable to repay debts and the family has no means of survival....'

The pamphlet ends on a poignant note:

'How can we challenge all these insults? What shall we, unhappy and powerless women, do?' It is signed by 'the *abalas* (helpless powerless women) of an unhappy *praja* (populace)'.

This pamphlet is the handiwork of women who are explicitly angry and rebellious. The points are made with striking clarity, and pose a profound challenge. Although no program of action is defined, the very fact of having so coherently articulated their suffering and the injustices heaped upon them is remarkable.

Jaggi was caught up with such issues. As her exposure intensified, she became adroit as an adviser and strategist.

Women and Sexual Assault

Landlords claimed a customary right to sexual favors from women landless labourer and non-occupancy tenants. There was little escape for a girl or woman who caught their eye. Some landlords considered it their birthright to spend the 'first night' with any girl or woman whose family worked for them. Obligation and helplessness forced many women to live with such intense exploitation.

Jaggi recalled, 'Zamindars and talukdars were very exploitative. They were butchers! Butchers, I tell you! They would pick up women from homes – daughters, daughters-in-law. How do I tell you, beti! They would take away young women from homes. She could be of any caste – Brahmani, Thakurain, Kurmi, Harijan... Nobody could say anything.'

Women from every caste felt vulnerable. So did Jaggi: she too was vulnerable, she too lived in fear. She mused, "We lived in

fear. But they never picked me. Nobody could ever say anything to me!" The movement provided her a protection ordinary families were unable to provide. Of course, her participation in the movement could also work against her. As everybody knew, sexual assault could be deliberately used as a weapon to repress agrarian struggle.

Jaggi was well aware that sexual assault had been an undercurrent throughout the peasant movement. In 1931, a Congress Enquiry Committee[43] noted that women and children too were beaten and tortured by agents of talukdars and armed policemen. For instance in Khureti village, Rae Bareli, zamindars and their henchmen dragged women out of their homes, snatched away their ornaments and further violated them. In Pipra village, Bahraich, a constable and two other men abducted Rammulan Lohar's wife, gang-raped her, and stole all her ornaments, cash and clothes. In Rae Bareli, a pregnant woman was beaten until she fell unconscious. In district Sultanpur, those who refused to perform *begar* were beaten; these included Ramdas Kurmi and his old mother. The Deputy Collector, zamindars and armed guards descended upon village Pipri, Unnao, raided all the houses and beat the men, women and children. Women were ordered to take off their clothes, and beaten; one testified that she was beaten and an attempt made to thrust a rod into her private parts. The same party went to an ajdoining village, Sada Sukh Khera. Zamindar Shiva Sundar abused a woman and kicked her on the breast so that she and her child fell to the ground. Insensate beating and filthy abuses continued in Dandanapur village. A blind seventy-year old woman was beaten with her own lathi, then Shiva Sundar kicked her to the ground and made vulgar demands, pulling at her dhoti and leaving her naked. Another woman was dragged, mauled and mercilessly beaten until she fell unconscious. Sukhadiya, wife of Anganu Chamar, was raped by four of Shiva Sundar's men.

Though protected by the strength of the movement amid which she lived, Jaggi knew that such brutal reprisal was occuring in different parts of Avadh. She was enraged. It made her even more determined in the resolve to fight injustice and the reign of terror unleashed by local and national rulers.

Jaggi on Marriage

As Jaggi's ideas matured, she used her position to mobilise support around social as well as political issues. She questioned deep-seated beliefs and deeply entrenched customs including that of child marriage.

A pamphlet written by Jaggi Devi, entitled '*Mata Shatru Pita Bairi*' (Mother An Enemy, Father A Foe), argued as follows:

'In this region the marriage traditions are so upside down that your daughters are married off two or even three times. Is this custom moral by any standards? Such a thing should not happen. From her birth onwards, a young girl becomes adept at sexual skills such as are appropriate to a prostitute. It is useless bringing such matters to court, because they are not legally punishable. A girl who has gone from one place to another is akin to a prostitute....

If you try to look carefully, with human eyes, you will see that the animals you buy for your house are not married off in childhood. Only when they mature do you take them to healthy bulls. You display wisdom with regard to animals. If you were to display the same wisdom with regard to your own young daughters, the custom of child marriage would disappear from everyone's house.'

This ingenious line of argument has a progressive ring to it. At this very time, the All India Women's Conference and other middle-class women's organisations were raising their voices against child marriage. Such ideas were in the air – and Jaggi and her fellow-

activists popularised what they felt was required. Her arguments were couched in idiom close to the soil, and had a powerful appeal. Cogent and forcefully argued, the pamphlet ended on a personal note:

'This is my – Jaggi's – purpose. Knowing the custom, I left my caste and family, coming into the house and protection of Baba Ram Chandar. Sisters, beware!'

The pamphlet even claimed an element of personal choice with regard to her marriage – a radical claim indeed. Who knows but that in the delicate shadow play of emotion and attraction, young Jaggi had played a decisive role in the matter of her marriage?

Several papers in the Baba Ram Chandra collection indicate a concern with issues surrounding marriage. A need for reduction in marriage expenses was expressed.[44] Jaggi is credited[45] with taking the initiative to bring forward a resolution, at a Kisan Sabha meeting in Rure, at which polygamy was criticised, and the view expressed that a man who kept more than one woman should be legally punished, as also a woman who lived with more than one man. It was also proposed that if a man and a woman stay together, their relations shuld not be treated as illegal. A woman who stays with a man without formal marriage should not be dismissed as being there merely to produce children, and she should be respected as a goddess (*devi*) if she bears a child. These radical resolutions were accepted at the meeting.

With Ram Chandar as her life-partner, Jaggi was able to develop her skills and persona in some unusual directions. She grew in ways beyond what was permitted to most women. She was able to wrest relatively greater freedom – and use it to advantage. The opportunity proved useful not only to herself, but to others as well.

The Cause of Women's Education

Jaggi became very familiar with the power of the written word, since Baba wrote a great deal, much of it published as pamphlets and widely distributed. She would say, "Baba fought with the pen."

In 1934 Jaggi sent a letter to the Deputy Inspector of schools, Pratapgarh, saying that if kisanins were to receive good education their lives would improve. She said kisanins wanted to meet the DI, and sought an appointment. They were given an appointment. Between 200 and 250 kisanins reached Pratapgarh, but were kept waiting. Finally they left, since he was clearly not available to meet them. Thereafter Jaggi sent him another letter, describing how all the women were kept waiting, and returned without meeting him. She demanded an explanation for such insulting behaviour[46].

Creative Methods of Mobilisation

The Kisanin Panchayat organized exhibitions to educate women, for instance it is recorded that one such exhibition was attended by kisanins from distant places. The women stayed overnight, food and stay being arranged. There is a record of two Praja Sangh meetings that were largely attended by women of Pratapgarh district, in September 1933 and April 1934. The Kisanin Panchayat would send separate invitation slips, signed by Jaggi Devi, for these meetings.

Baba Ram Chandar strategically introduced progressive messages through religious verses and popular stories. For instance, he popularised Kaikeyi as a woman who supported her son to become king, and advised modern-day women to support their menfolk who wanted to serve the nation. Jaggi adopted similar methods.

In 1933 a circular in Baba Ram Chandar's writing stated that a *yagya* was being held for Bala Devi (a goddess) to celebrate the benefits that kisanins have won due to Jaggi Devi's efforts. Jaggi and prominent members of her panchayat would attend the ceremony[47].

A unique protest in 1940, against landlords usurping grazing land, saw participation by many women, including one Laximin Kurmin who was described as the most active participant in the movement. Over 10,000 animals were taken in procession to the D.C.'s office in Pratapgarh. Women played a part in organizing the event, and sent their animals. For instance Maharani Devi, Gainda Devi and Paiga Devi each sent one ox, while many other women sent cows, goats, horses, asses and even camels[48].

Jaggi became adept at integrating political messages into her daily life, weaving these messages into pithy sayings, songs and bhajans. When she traveled for meetings, in the evenings there would be music and singing. Jaggi would sing bhajans about the suffering and endurance of Sita – a figure she, as well as many other village women, identified closely with. She used the identification as a means to mobilise them – not only to struggle and make sacrifices for the common good, but also, like Sita, to take their own decisions.

Chapter V

Many Fronts
In Jail and Outside: 1940-47

"Those in jail were better off. We experienced so much suffering moving from place to place, hiding from the police."

– *Jaggi Devi*

Jaggi Remembers...

Jaggi shared vivid memories from the 1940-47 period. Peasants from Avadh took active part in the anti-war satyagraha and Quit India movements. There was widespread rebellion in the countryside, the struggles being a popular groundswell 'from below'. The nationalist call was a catalysing force, and sometimes a unifying link. People interpreted Gandhian campaigns in their own way. Often peasant militancy reached a pitch the Congress leadership refused to countenance.

Local leaders amplified Gandhi's call for swaraj and satyagraha. Along with many other peasant women from the Avadh countryside, Jaggi Devi had enrolled herself as a '4-anna member' of the Indian National Congress during the late 1930s. Active peasant women insisted on exercising voting rights in organizational elections, and took part in direct action and struggles. During individual satayagrahas in December 1940, Jaggi requested the Pratapgarh District Congress Committee president for a satyagrahi pass, and distributed the following leaflet with her signature, asking peasants to:

'a) Never believe the alien government or its allies and servants, or support them in any way.

b) Do not help or be with rajas and maharajas, since they are friends of the alien government.

c) Look after your homes, families, lands, animals and yourselves.

d) Break all caste norms when in a crisis.

e) Do not side with those who indulge in violence and looting.

f) Support the poor, not the rich, as they are all one, and many talukdars, small zamindars and capitalists want to create disturbances with the help of upper classes and arms.'

Jaggi's leaflet declared that she was marching ahead fearlessly, and others should do the same. She wound up with a sisterly admonition: 'Don't get left behind in the house' ('*Ghar na reh jaana*').

Under Jaggi's leadership, at least ten other women offered satyagraha. These were Mussamat Putta (of Chamar caste), Sampaati (Kurmi), Razi (Kurmi), Sukhi (Teli), Sukhmani (Pasi), Bubai (Kurmi), Putra (Kurmi), Abhilakhi (Kurmi), Basanti (Brahman), and Sundara Devi (Ravidas).[49] Out of the eleven women, nine went to jail, but the D.C.C. did not allow Jaggi and Sundara Devi to be jailed. Despite their high levels of involvement and participation, Jaggi and Sundara were neither arrested nor jailed. Years later Jaggi described why: "Gandhi Baba said that women who are pregnant or have small babies, should not court arrest. So we had to turn back from the satyagraha in Pratapgarh. But we kept the movement going, from outside."

Jaggi respected 'Gandhi Baba' but found it fairly offensive that he should instruct and control peasant women's energies. Gandhi, Nehru and other Congress leaders did constantly try to control

peasant energies, assimilating their force along mainstream nationalist lines. People like Jaggi resented this streamlining.

Jaggi and Sundara were both pregnant, but left to their own devices would have willingly courted arrest and gone to jail. Presumably Gandhi expected the women to withdraw from action and retreat into their homes. What happened was quite the opposite. Refusing to stay quietly at home while battle raged all around, Jaggi was out and about, keeping the struggle alive, mobilising support in village after village.

By April 1941, many peasant activists were arrested, and a large number jailed. Baba Ram Chandar was amongst the jailed satyagrahis. So were Sitaram, Kasi, Acchaibar Singh, Prahladi and others.[50] Women were arrested from almost every district of the province, and given Rigorous Imprisonment ranging from a few months to over a year[51].

Women's Participation: Essential for Victory

A pamphlet – anonymous, but very likely composed by Jaggi – contains an impassioned plea for women's full participation in movement activities[52]. The pamphlet, marked Devsara Aaspur, dated 11th April 1941, was written to spark off discussion at a meeting.

It began, 'I find everybody clambering onto a vehicle with just one wheel. How far can such a vehicle travel? Whenever the time arose, women of India worked alongside men. In the present age too, they are doing so. Victory was achieved at all such times – and today too.'

Jaggi/the writer noted that women were, however, not participating as actively as they should, because: 'Rural women's lives today are restricted to obtaining jewels, clothes and good

food. Why should they take interest in matters of war? Thousands of women from good families are miserable, enduring widowhood. What is the condition of those who go to war? This meeting must develop a viewpoint on this….'

The writer suggested organising a meeting for women of all castes and classes. In this meeting, 'Shatranis, Brahmanins, Kisanins and Vaishyas would all put forward their views.' She added that women should support their men who go to the battlefield: 'When people go to battle sitting aloft a two-wheeled chariot, they will emerge world-victors.' She noted that people might laugh at her ideas, but this didn't frighten her. The fact was that if a man went to war leaving behind a weeping family, at the time of trial his strength failed him. There was an obstruction in achieving the highest national goals.

The pamphlet ended on a note indicating her recent personal experience: 'I went with my sisters to the site of war at Pratapgarh. But then women with small children had to return, at the instruction of the Mahatma…. So I am forewarning my sisters.'

Gandhi's paternalistic attitude did not sit too well with Jaggi. She objected to his unilateral decision instructing pregnant women and women with young children to return home rather than offer satyagraha and court arrest. For years, Jaggi and her fellow-activists had worked tirelessly to draw women out of their homes and into the fold of active movements. To a certain extent, they had succeeded. Such injunctions would turn back the clock. She was angry, also because she was convinced that women's retreat would weaken the fight considerably.

Jaggi had participated in movements since she was a child, and continued doing so as a mother. Obviously, as a mother she had the welfare of her children at heart, but this would not have

deterred her from risking a jail sentence. By decreeing that women withdraw from the line of action, Gandhi denied them the right to take their own decisions. Jaggi realised that such injunctions would actually push women back into their homes and limit their political participation.

As it was, Baba Ram Chandar was arrested on 28th April 1941. He was sentenced to nine months Rigorous Imprisonment, though released in six months' time. Exactly the same was the case with Sundara Devi's husband Sitaram. Both men were released from jail in late October 1941, but re-arrested in mid-1942.

When Baba Ram Chandar, Sitaram and several others were arrested in August 1942, Jaggi and Sundara again remained outside jail since by now they were mothers of small babies! They did not go against Gandhi's explicit instructions. Part of the reason was that by remaining out of jail, they would be able to keep in touch with people and help keep the popular movement active.

Sundara Devi Remembers: 1941

Sundara Devi was a few years younger than Jaggi. She related dramatic events from the 1940s[53]: "I was married in 1940. My mother-in-law, husband Sitaramji, sister-in-law Ramna Devi, were all in the movement. I too joined the movement. I never remained a bride. I was never in purdah. From my parental family many objected but I said, 'I am against slavery. You are purdanashin, remain within your purdah!' In 1941 when Subhash Chandra Bose came to Pratapgarh, I went to hear him.

"Sitaramji would say, 'Why purdah? – You are my right half!' When I went to meet him in jail he cried. 'You have lived with me like a brother!' he said.

"My mother-in-law was not educated, but had more brains than many educated people. She was a member of the Congress committee. The Congress has its roots here. At that time membership was 4 annas per year. My mother-in-law would go off for meetings and conferences. My father-in-law had died and Sitaramji was the only son. He had three sisters. His full name was Sitaram Chaudhri. The land was in my mother-in-law's name. In the 1930s the family gave 170 bighas of land to the Congress – they went to Lucknow to record the land transfer.

"My mother-in-law supported me completely. In 1941 we went for the Jail Bharo Andolan. But I was pregnant. So was Jaggi. We came back because Gandhi Baba sent us away. The police brought warrants in the name of Sitaram, Kasi, Baba etc. In those days if anybody said, `The people of India will not pay taxes' – immediately the person was handcuffed. Many of us were jailed. Budhni Devi, who lives in Bisar, was jailed. She was a satyagrahi and was much older than us. Her husband remained home, but she was jailed. Mahrani Devi from Dharauli was jailed. So was the wife of Ganga Deen from Dharauli. There was another woman too, whose name I can't remember.

"In 1941 Baba and Sitaramji were jailed and released after six months. My daughter Bitti (Annapurna) was born here in Devsara, in July/August 1941. My mother-in-law didn't go to jail because she looked after the land and crops. Jaggi stayed on at Daudpur Kunda. Her daugher Vijayi was born in Daudpur. Lalli was 3 years old when Vijaya was born. During the 1941 satyagraha we were able to stay in our homes. We also kept meeting people to keep up the spirits of the movement, since all the major leaders were in jail."

...1942: 'Underground'

Sundara Devi continued, "During the 1942 movement Jaggi and I went `underground'. We dodged the police, and they could not nab us. We roamed the jungles. Initially we took our babies with us, but they would fret, so we left them at home. We had to stay out of our homes otherwise the police would arrest us.

"When my husband was caught, the police searched our house. My mother-in-law, sister-in-law and I were there. I was a young woman. The policeman shouted at me: `Why are you joining them?' I said, `Who should I join? It is my duty to be with my husband. Also, to obey Mahatmaji.... I don't want to become a slave in this nation, like you are. I want to break this slavery.' He grew furious and said, `I am a Kshatriya, I will punish you for your words. You chit of a girl, you dare to speak like this.' He abused me. My mother-in-law supported me. We had a Congress flag up on a pole. They pulled it down. To take revenge on me, that constable complained to the Deputy Saheb and got a warrant issued in my name.

"Gangs of six policemen would turn up at our door in the middle of the night. They would come on horseback, galloping through the night. I would run out of the house and go hide in the cornfields at the back. Who knows, they might molest me. The police became very abusive. So I left. My mother-in-law said, `Go, *beti*. I will look after the house.'

"I took my little daughter and stepped out. For some days I lived in Toondya in the house of an old woman. She was a widow. She had one son, Budhai.

'Then we walked to Bilvare Chamariya. It is 15 or 16 miles from Devsara. At some places the river was in spate and there was water right up to my shoulders. It took one day to reach my elder

sister Basanti Devi's house in Bilvare Chamariya. She kept me hidden in a courtyard. She was scared. She would bring me food, water. Her husband also respected me. I stayed there for one month. My sister kept me very affectionately. My daughter would cry. It was hot. All night I would be in my sister's house, all day I would be in the fields. I couldn't meet anybody in the village. Then my sister brought me back to Devsara. She couldn't bear to see my daughter's suffering so she brought me home. For a few days I would lock the door and stay in the inner courtyard. When Annapurna grew restless I would leave her with my mother-in-law. After a few days I left her with my mother-in-law and went to Daudpur.

"Jaggi left Lalli and Vijaya with Dhiraji, and she and I began walking to Ghooisarnath. Two others joined us – Sutahil and Budhai. All four were underground. We lived in Maghai Sarai at Baldev Singh's. Then we went to Mehendiya – a village south of Patti. We stayed in Sutahil's home. Budhai's home was there too. Then we went to Dharauli. We reached the house of Maharani Devi, Budhni Devi, Gangadin – all Barmas. We stayed overnight at their home. We were served *makki ki roti* (corn bread) and *urad dal* (lentils). It was hot, and we were terribly hungry. We would die for a glass of water with some jaggery! Now we laugh at the memory.

"We reached the Chankan Devi temple. We had neither a glass with us nor a mug, nor 5 paisa. We were all fakirs! We had only the clothes we were wearing. We stayed at Ramjhari's house, she was a Barma – widow of Kalesar Giri. We appealed to her, `Maharani, help us in this hour of crisis!' We stayed the night, but she was trembling with fear. The next day we left, otherwise the police would have burned down their house too.

"We reached Ghooisarnath and stayed in Surju Kurmi's home, Madhav Kurmi's home. They looked after the gardens and the flowers. We stayed there for a few days. We stayed under the protection of Aanahi Sadhu. Like the sun moves, so he kept moving! He begged for alms and fed us. We cooked the food in the evening. If there was no *dal*, we ate with salt. If there was no salt, we ate with *dal*. We shared whatever we had, everybody got a bit to eat. Aanahi Baba would say, `Don't be frightened. If the police comes, we will beat them with sticks and staves.' He brought home the bed on which a corpse was floated in the river, and said, 'Sleep on this, *beti*.'



Jaggi Devi's home in Daudpur Kunda village.
Jaggi: "Those who fought for freedom all live in mud huts"

"After a month we left that Sadhu's place. We heard that the warrants against us had been withdrawn. As we were walking we found 2 Rupees on the ground, so we hired an ikka and traveled back in it! It was evening by the time we reached Pratapgarh. The Daroga's ikka was in front of ours. We thought we would now get caught. We let the Daroga go far ahead, alighted at Aanadev village and started walking. We reached

Patti and left it on foot at about 7 pm. Sutahil was with us. We reached Devsara at 1 in the night. My sister-in-law woke up. She made *khichri* at 2 in the night. My daughter Bitti had seen a dream that day, that her Maai (mother) would return. She saw me and ran to meet me, and fell down. For one or two months after that, I remained locked up in my house. Jaggi went to Daudpur to Lalli, Vijaya and her mother.

"After a month we grew fearless. Baba and Sitaram were all in Allahabad jail. They were under Section 26, kept in solitary confinement. We could not meet them. Every month we received one postcard, and every month one letter would go from here. They were released from jail after another year. It was July 1943 when they were released."

1944: Struggles on the Home Front

Sundara Devi continued, "The children, home, fields all had to be looked after. I still went for meetings, though less than earlier. The movement went on until 1944. There was rioting and looting, then the men would go `underground'. In 1944 they were arrested under the Revolutionary Looting case. Sitaram was arrested with fourteen men with spears and pistols at night, in the Pirthiganj temple. They were jailed for rioting."

In a letter from jail dated 25.4.1944 Baba Ram Chandar wrote: 'Shrimati Jaggiji, mother-in-law Dhiraji, daughters Lalitaji and Vijayaji, and the elders and youngsters of all families, and all friends – my greetings. I have not set eyes upon you for many days.... There must have been a loss in agriculture. Loss and profit depend upon luck. Thanks be to you and your mother – you are rowing my broken boat. God will bless you for this penance. Remain firm and strong. Do reply to the letter. – Baba Ram Chandar, Kisan Sevak.'

Ram Chandar's letters frequently reminded Jaggi and Dhiraji that they must see to the education of both daughters. Given the circumstances, this was not possible.

It was difficult for Jaggi to manage everything at home. The hurly-burly of movement, and the steady repression and fracturing of struggles had depleted her energies. Activists were in a state of shock and disarray. For the first time in her life Jaggi was caught up with the daily grind of essential housework and childcare activities. Dhiraji was unwell, so Jaggi had to pitch in and take over the major share of household responsibilities.

Dhiraji died in 1945/46. Over the years she had provided steady, strong support to Jaggi. She had always been there for her grandchildren. Wise and caring, she had kept the household running, come what may.

After Dhiraji's death Jaggi's public activities slowed down perforce, as she focused her attention on the home front. The patch of land on which they lived, in Daudpur, had been in Dhiraji's name. This land was transferred to Jaggi's name.

Chapter VI

'FREEDOM': 1947 ONWARDS

"Nobody can order you off the cot you sit on! You are children of freedom, emperors of freedom. Every district is free now. As Delhi is, so is Pratapgarh. You can walk without fear. A woman too should come out fearlessly, and wander from one place to another.... We fought for this freedom. And we got it."

– Jaggi Devi

"'Swatantra Bharat' hai kahan?" ("Where is Swatantra Bharat? Where is Free India?")

– Jaggi Devi

'Free India' and 'Swatantra Bharat'

Most peasants – like other freedom fighters – placed their hopes for a better future at the doors of the new regime. Generally they imagined that the new government would implement changes in law and policies that would radically improve the conditions of the peasantry. After all it was now 'our' people who ran the government, so surely they would usher in an era of equity and justice.

But Baba Ram Chandar was sceptical. To this astute peasant leader it was clear that the classes that assumed power in 'free' India were likely to betray the cause of poor peasants. Ram Chandar had been jailed for long stretches of time during the pre-Independence years. He had aged in that time and kept indifferent health. Physically weak, he alternated between weary cynicism on one hand, and bursts of enthusiasm on the other.

In 1948 Jaggi and Baba Ram Chandra had a son. They gave him an extraordinary name – Swatantra Bharat. Jaggi explained, "Baba named him 'Swatantra Bharat'. The name signified hope. He wanted this child to grow in freedom, not in sorrow." For Jaggi and the Baba, the new child became a concrete symbol of their dreams and hopes for a truly freely India.

Baba Passes Away

Though unwell, Baba Ram Chandar was restless and kept traveling to different villages to assess conditions and hold meetings on various relevant issues. He had gone on one such tour when he was taken ill in Bhavpur village. The villagers took care of him, but his condition did not improve. He was in no condition to be shifted. So Jaggi came to Bhavpur to look after him. The three children came with her.

On a trip to Bhavpur years later, standing in a dilapidated hut, Jaggi recalled, "Meetings used to be held in Bhavpur in the big open ground. One day Baba held a meeting, but next day he fell ill. He stayed in this hut, and drank water from this well. He was here for a month but then his dead body was taken out from this very lane. My heart breaks when I come here!"

She walked towards Baba's samadhi, set amid a few mango trees adjoining Bhavpur, and stood with folded hands by the simple, dignified white stone structure. Tomblike, the samadhi had 'Baba Ram Chandar' and the year 1950 carved on it.

Jaggi was barely 35 years old when she was widowed. Lalli was 11, Vijaya 8 and Swatantra Bharat just 2 years old. The family continued to live in Daudpur in the tiny mud cottage. Jaggi retreated into her family and subsistence activities.

So did many other activists in that era. The ferment of the movement had died out, and with it the actuality of a community of activists. For Jaggi, the feeling of isolation was compounded by the loss of her husband.

Freedom Fighters' Lists

Lists of freedom fighters were drawn up, but Jaggi's contributions were not recognized! Her name was not on the list of freedom fighters from her area: the reason was that she had not been jailed. This was an early example of the sheer ignorance and arrogance displayed by the bureaucrat-rulers of 'free' India. To the bureaucratic mindset Jaggi was only a poor peasant, and that too a woman who had not seen the insides of a prison cell. The fact that the struggle for freedom had been waged on several different fronts was simply overlooked. However, after appealing to the authorities her claim was finally recognized. Accepted as a freedom fighter, she was allowed a small pension, and free passes for bus and train travel.

A Helping Hand

Daily life gradually settled into a new rhythm. She attended to the growing children, kept a cow so that they had enough milk to drink, and tried to eke out a living from the land. Her daughters helped her out at home, and in the fields. Although she and the Baba had been keen to educate all three children, in her straitened circumstances Jaggi managed to send only the youngest, Swatantra Bharat, to school. Managing hand to mouth, Jaggi 's life had become an unending grind, a strenuous struggle for survival.

Help arrived in the form of a *sevak* – Gurmilan. Gurmilan's father had been a *sevak* of Baba Ram Chandar. As a young boy, Gurmilan

had run off with a group of Sadhus. Fortunately for Jaggi, Gurmilan decided to come and serve her. He described his motivation: "I was visiting the temple next to Jaggi Mata's land. I heard an *akashvani* (a voice from the heavens). It was the Baba's voice. He said, `Go and serve Jaggi Mata!' He called out to me three times. I came here."[54] The wandering ascetic settled down: this was around 1955. He looked after the Jaggi with great reverence. An air of thoughtful detachment hung about him even when he was older. Later, he acquired two young followers – Jeetlal and Baburam.

Gurmilan recalled, "Jaggi Mata was in great difficulty. She didn't have rice for two square meals a day. I cleared and leveled the land and planted some wheat and sugarcane. The house was just mud with a thatched roof, I made the tiled roof. I looked after the cows and brought in the firewood." Gentle and



Jaggi Mata

hardworking, Gurmilan became the general caretaker and a trusted member of the family. He looked after the children very affectionately. Much later, when he aged, Jaggi hired a sharecropper from Takiya village to cultivate the land.

Recalled Jaggi, "After Baba died I was quiet for five years. Then Gurmilan arrived. He fixed the hut." Gurmilan mused, "Jaggi Mata was surrounded by thieves and cheats. Nobody was here to serve her. So long as I am around, she should not face any difficulties.... Mata's ideas have great depth. She has walked barefoot in hundreds of villages and seen everything. Baba became a corpse but he did not die. He is immortal. He speaks from inside Mata Jaggi. He speaks from the sky. Who understands all these matters?"

Daughters Vijaya and Lalita

By the late 1950s Jaggi arranged Lalli's marriage into a Brahman family from a village in Sultanpur district. Lalli moved to her husband's home, where she subsequently bore three sons and a daughter. Two of her sons later went to Bombay to work as house painters, while the third went to Delhi in search of work.

Jaggi arranged Vijaya's marriage to a young Brahman, also of Sultanpur district. She was proud to have Brahman sons-in-law. Since her husband had been Brahman, she reasoned that all their children were Brahmans, and should be accepted as such. She identified grooms through her network of old activists, basically searching for families with some sense of values, where her daughters would have a good life. She had no dowry to offer. On both occasions she asked a pandit to locate auspicious dates, and held simple wedding ceremonies with just a few relatives, co-activists and neighbours present.

Vijaya's husband was dissatisfied with his life in the village. Finally he and Vijaya moved to Indore. Baba Ram Chandar's maternal grandmother had belonged to Indore, and some extended family members still lived there. Vijaya's husband probably approached them, and they helped him secure a job in a textile mill. They stayed in the mill quarters. Vijaya and her husband had four sons and a daughter, who grew up in Indore. Her husband's younger brothers also moved to Indore. Many years later Vijaya's husband lost his job, and the family sank into financial trouble.

Son Swatantra Bharat

In the late '60s Swatantra Bharat completed his schooling. He wanted to study further but needed help for admission into college in Pratapgarh. Jaggi went with him to meet Munishwar Dutt, who had been an associate of Baba Ram Chandar during the pre-Independence years, and was now an influential person in Pratapgarh. But Munishwar Dutt refused to recognise Jaggi or help Swatantra Bharat. This was a great blow to Jaggi and Swatantra Bharat.

Considering the option of settling down to agriculture, Jaggi and Swatantra Bharat tried to gain possession of some land in Rure village that had been donated to Baba Ram Chandar. But this proved impossible. By rights, Jaggi should have inherited some family land in Para village, but this too was a lost cause.

Swatantra Bharat had grown up on a staple diet of stories about the peasants' struggles for freedom. Frustrated and angry, he now declared, "This is a false country. I will not work for it. I will not do desh-seva. How am I to live? What can I do with this little patch of land? I can neither study further nor is there any job here for me." Learning of her brother's dilemma, Vijaya called him to Indore. He went to Indore and joined work as a mill

hand. Later Vijaya arranged his marriage in Indore, and Swatantra Bharat settled there.

Jaggi went to Indore for the wedding. Swatantra Bharat asked her to stay for a month, but she returned home after three days. Subsequently Swatantra Bharat sometimes visited Daudpur. His children never visited, nor did his wife. Jaggi never insisted that they come, since she felt she had no place to keep them comfortably, nor proper food to feed them. They sent her a photo – husband, wife and two children, which she often looked at wistfully.

Quietly, sadly, with an undercurrent of unbearable pain, she would ask, "Who is there poorer than myself, and poorer than Swatantra Bharat?" She would have liked to live with her son, and knew that he would welcome her, but her roots lay deep in the countryside: "I love my fields and trees, cow and calves. And this is where my politics is. It is not in the city."

"*Swatantra Bharat hai kahan?*" – she would often ask. The question was pitched at two different levels of meaning, both equally important and interconnected. Is *this* `free' India? – in which the son of peasant leaders is pushed to earn his livelihood at the margins of urban economy? Intermingling with the many memories that haunted her would arise the double-layered question, each layer leavened with tears, pain and anger.

Chapter VII

LONE CRUSADOR

Walking through the fields, Jaggi sang, "The path was hard, her feet delicate... Sita ji walked thus....". So does Jaggi.

Some people called her 'Mata', but others addressed her as 'Neta'....

Right from the mid-'50s, with Gurmilan's support on the home front, Jaggi began traveling around the countryside again, attending political meetings of varied hues.

Shortly after Independence, the Avadh Kisan Sabha had formally merged with the Congress. It never regained its former position in peasant politics as the major representative of local popular resistance. A few old activists still met at Rure, but their weekly meetings lacked energy. Jaggi continued to attend as regularly as she could. Most of the old guard was exhausted – weary of making sacrifices, broken and bewildered. Over the years, their numbers dwindled.

By the 1970s Jaggi was the eldest at these meetings, and held in high regard. Ram Bahadur Singh and Shiv Shankar – Jhinguri Singh's grandson and nephew respectively – were genial men who carefully stored bundles of documents and related stories from the movement days. But increasingly the stories seemed stale, and had few listeners. There was no movement ethos any more, and issues discussed grew relatively narrow and limited. Some young descendants of freedom fighters formed a union for 'dependents of freedom fighters'[55]. Claiming to be too dignified

to struggle for jobs, they demanded jobs as chowkidars, peons etc under a special quota.

Jaggi missed the spirit of struggle that had inspired so many ordinary people in the previous era. She felt alienated from the opportunistic politics of the day. She still lived and breathed idealistic values, but she felt isolated now – a lone crusader.

Search for Allies

Jaggi never gave up her search for allies: for a viable politics.

She used her free bus pass to move around and attend as many political meetings as possible. Jaggi mused, "Whatever the dispensation, it is essential to speak out. It is not possible to live without speaking out!... When Baba was alive, I went for meetings and conferences. After Baba died I began going again: even more than I did earlier."

Jaggi felt a sense of allegiance with the Congress Party, but gradually her faith was eroded. In 1976, during the Emergency, she led a struggle against levy collection of wheat, and was briefly jailed. She also led a protest against a death in a family planning camp. Due to this she lost her pension as a freedom fighter, which was restored only in 1983.[56]

By the 1980s she declared, "The government today are cheats. Dinesh Singh was a zamindar but today he is the MLA. Shripath Mishra was elected from here but he sits in Delhi...." A range of political parties continued to invite her for meetings and special functions – Bahujan Party, Communists, Congress, Lok Dal... – and generally she agreed to attend. There would be speeches and garlands. Jaggi too would sit on the stage, often the only woman, always the only poor person. Her value, to the organisers,

was purely symbolic. Nothing authentic or meaningful ever emerged from any of these meetings.

Within Pratapgarh she often visited the tehsildar at Patti, or the District Magistrate at Pratapgarh, to acquaint them with the issues and problems of ordinary people, and proffer advice. In1985, Jaggi participated in a function at Nehru Bhavan, Lucknow, in which she (and some other freedom fighters) signed a pledge that they would 'work actively with full commitment and honesty to establish unity, integration and communal harmony in the country and implement the 20-point programme, under the direction of honorable Shri Rajiv Gandhiji.' The Uttar Pradesh Congress Swatantrata Senani Samiti organized the function on October 31st 1985, that is the first anniversary of late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's 'sacrifice day'.

Jaggi paid two visits to Delhi in the 1980s with the intention of bringing the voice of the people to the attention of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and advise him on how to run the country. Jeetlal, one of Jaggi's faithful soldiers, said, "Two hundred people will go with you to Delhi. Nobody can stop you!" The first time Jaggi went to Delhi, she stayed at Shripath Mishra's house and made an appointment with Rajiv Gandhi (whom she called 'Raju'). When she met him she clutched his wrist, her fingers like talons – in the same grip with which she frequently greeted the tehsildar of Patti or the DM of Pratapgarh – and began telling him, in no uncertain terms, how the resources of the country were being squandered while the poor suffered. But Rajiv Gandhi was busy and barely spent a couple of minutes with her before hurrying off.

During her second trip to Delhi Jaggi stayed with some youngsters from Pratapgarh who lived in Samaipur Badli, a low-income area of Delhi. A committed supporter, Bhagwandin Varma, helped

her with the necessary arrangements. Gurmilan traveled along with Jaggi and Bhagwandin. But again the politician in Delhi had no time for her. This time he did not even give her an appointment. She returned to Pratapgarh, disappointed in her mission.

Later Jaggi mused, "What is Rajiv Gandhi? You and I do more work than he does…! Indira was Jawaharlal's daughter. She was like my daughter. Raju is like my grandson. Jawaharlal fought – he had a hand in bringing about freedom from the British. Rajiv should go from village to village and listen to the people. We went to meet him but he was in too much of a hurry. Tape what people have to say! Let Rajiv hear!"



Ram Akbal, Hiravati and their three sons, Labeda village, 1989.
Ram Akbal's father Achhaibar Singh was a peasant leader and freedom fighter. He is reputed to have once carried Jawaharlal Nehru on his shoulders for several miles.

Jaggi the 'Neta'

During the 1980s Jaggi petitioned the government to open a Khadi Ashram in her village, Daudpur Kunda, so that a number of women could be gainfully employed in spinning and weaving. She wanted to make a *gaushala* too, for the care of aged cattle. She wanted to devote herself to constructive work activities.

Jaggi was staunchly opposed to consumerism. She would say, "We should make our own cotton." She would pick cotton bolls, clean the wisps and spin them into thread. She said, "I've always worn an old dhoti like this one – torn and mended. I have not entertained greed. I was greedy only about having cows and buffaloes, but now I cannot feed them."

She said – half-serious and half-humorous – "I have worked for so many years. If you add up the salary I should get a huge treasure!" She worked round the clock, trying to mobilise people around various issues. She would grow indignant and say, "Those who get pensions – what are they doing? People are in jobs, and more jobs, but what work are they doing?"

When I went to Daudpur for my second visit, Jaggi had just returned from another village, Kehla. She explained, "There is a lot of work in and around Kehla. I spent five days there. We held a meeting. I have many soldiers there." She had a motley bunch of followers and `soldiers'.

Some people called her 'Mata', but others addressed her as 'Neta'. Indicating Gurmilan, she exclaimed, "See, Gurmilan has come to serve me. The sadhu has left his ashram and come into politics!"

Bhagwandin Varma, a local villager who helped and believed in Jaggi, confided sadly, "Today's politics are not reaching the

peasants." Jaggi was the one ray of hope in his bleak landscape – "She is such a strong person with strong roots in politics. She gets ready at midnight if needed. She doesn't bother about food or thirst.... People say to me, why have you gone over to Jaggi Mata? You have forgotten your own family!"[57]

During the last decade of Jaggi's life Lalli, her elder daughter, spent most of her time in Daudpur. Lalli's children were grown up by then. Said Jaggi, "Lalli's in-laws and husband rebuked her for wanting to live with her mother. They said, `Your mother is a neta. Why do you go to her?' But she came. She has been brought up by netas; the seeds of *netagiri* are within her. Then why will she not come to her old mother? She told them, `My mother is active in *netagiri*. My brother is not there. I will go to serve her and look after her.' Her father was a neta, mother is a neta, so she too is a neta."

Lalli, weak and ailing, needed medical attention. Said her mother, "She is giving her life now to serving the nation. That is what she is doing – desh-seva."

Old Colleagues: Retreat from Politics

In April 1989 Jaggi took me on a walking tour of surviving freedom fighters and their families[58]. She was welcomed, loved and respected wherever we went – but very few really believed, any more, in the struggles she still tried to wage.

Visiting her ex-colleague Sundara Devi in Devsara village, Jaggi told her, "Many people gathered when I went to Kasaipur. We must organise a big meeting there." Sundara asked, "Who will organise it?"

Jaggi replied, "You and I." Sundara dismissed her airily, saying "She's mad!"

Sundara Devi ran a small, very tacky shop in order to make a living. In the 1930s her in-laws had gifted land to the Congress; her husband Sitaram had been jailed right up to 1947. She mused, "His shoulder broke due to police lathis. Afterwards the CID investigated the case and gave a positive report. Govind Ballabh Pant said, 'Now there will be no dandas on your shoulders.' But we were still beaten, and there were inquiries against us. Lal Bahadur Shastri said we people should get Rs 45,000 as damages. All we got was a pension of Rs 32, from 1950 or so.... Now netas only come for votes." As an afterthought, as if she were trying to somehow convince herself, she remarked, "Today I'm happy with the government. They are goondas but they have given us recognition. And they are trying to get rid of poverty."

Of her daughter Annapurna, born during the Gandhian satyagrahas of 1941-42, she said, "My daughter studied. Somehow we were able to send her to school. She is a Sister in Azamgarh. Her daughter Jashodhara is an ANM (Auxiliary Nurse-Midwife) near Patti. But Jashodhara's husband is a good-for-nothing. Two of her children live with me."

*

In Labeda village we met Ram Akbal, whose father Acchaibar Singh was a steady comrade of Baba Ram Chandar. In this area people believe that Acchaibar Singh once lifted Jawaharlal Nehru on his shoulders and carried him for several miles. Jaggi explained, "Jawaharlal was delicate and his feet were so soft. He was exhausted with the sun and the meetings. So Acchaibar Singh carried him up to Saifabad."

Ram Akbal had a perennially anxious look, his face prematurely lined. It was the look of a person unsure where his next meal was to come from, or how his children would be fed. Ram Akbal's

wife Hiravati and sons Ramesh, Subhash and Ajit looked after us: we spent the night in their tiny hut.

Ram Akbal showed us his father Acchaibar Singh's certificate: "awarded by the nation for his memorable contributions".... It was impossible to make out more, since the paper was badly eaten up by insects.

*

Walking through the fields next day, barefoot as usual, Jaggi sang, "*Kathor bhumi komal padgami.... Sita ji chaleen theen...*" (*"The path was hard, her feet delicate... Sita ji walked thus....".)*

*

In Bisar village, when 100-year old Budhni Devi saw us, she began shouting and calling me a thief. Jaggi had warned me, "She has gone mad." Then Jaggi talked to her, and Budhni became calm and spoke lucidly. She recalled, "In Kanpur I met Gandhi. He was a good man. He had such a big head, and very long arms.... Jawaharlal had come to Rure. My parents and so many other people were there. I was there.... And now Indira has been killed by her own men...."

She commented, "If during zamindari we sat on a cot the zamindar would say, how are you sitting on the cot? They would loot our mangoes and sugarcane. Now that is not possible.... But the zamindari system will come again! Again it will come! You can harness a bull and put it on the path, but if the bull leaves the path and wanders off to the grass, what can you do?"

*

At Bhavpur a worn-out, weary-looking man, Sitaram Kurmi, showed us his father's jail papers – 'Prayag, caste Kurmi, resident Bari, thana Patti, district Pratapgarh, Rigorous Imprisonment,

Fine Rs 50, under section 38 (5) 121, dated 5.4.41. District Jail, Pratapgarh.'

Sitaram Kurmi recounted, "My father was jailed thrice. He was kept in Naini, Pratapgarh, Rae Bareli. We all went to meet him in jail. Our house was mortgaged. It was seized because we were paupers. Later we got it back." Sitaram Kurmi's children Ram Surat, Kevla Devi, Prema Devi, Bare Lal, Samai Lal and Chameli Devi all looked at us – ragged and wide-eyed. The certificate had no relation at all to their lives.

*

In Pehra village, Mahantlal told us that during the freedom struggle the police had tortured his father Bhagwandin. Mahantlal showed us Bhagwandin's arrest slip. Rampati, Bhagwandin's wife, was still alive. Mahantlal was scraping together a meagre living, looking after his five sons and a daughter.

In the same village Kedar, son of freedom fighter Prahladi, showed us his father's freedom fighter certificate. Prahladi was sentenced on 14.12.1942 to 21 months R.I. (Rigorous Imprisonment). Four decades after his father's jail sentence, Kedar was living hand to mouth, working on a small patch of land that did not yield enough for his family to eat. The certificate was grimy, dog-eared – and meaningless. The word 'freedom' sounded hollow in his ears.

In the same village we met Mahadev – an old man. Jaggi related, "Meetings took place in Mahadev's house. Once when the police came to arrest Baba, Baba went in and sat with the women of the house, pulling a *ghunghat* over his face. He escaped from the back door."

*

Ram Avadh's father Ram Bharosa, of Bhavpur village, was a freedom fighter. Explained Ram Avadh, "My father was

responsible for communications – passing messages from one place to another. He announced meetings. Baba said some people should remain outside jail to carry on the work. My father was one of those who remained outside. His work was very important for the Congress." Later Ram Bharosa left the village and went to Bombay: in '47 he was in Bombay. His children and wife remained in the village. Ram Avadh was a Pradhan of five villages.

*

Algoo Gadariya was also from Bhavpur village. His ancestors used to provide personal services to the talukdar's family – pulling the fan and other menial housework. His father Ram Swarup Gadariya went for the satyagraha to Pratapgarh, and was jailed. He died in the freedom struggle ('*sati ho gaye*'). Algoo showed us his father Ram Swarup Gadariya's freedom fighter's certificate. Algoo was a landless labourer; his son was studying in the village primary school.

Jaggi – In Her Elements

The third time I went to meet Jaggi, en route I met Mr B.M. Pandey, DM of Pratagpargh. Appreciating my research interest, he offered transport up to Jaggi's village. At Patti the tehsildar, Mr Varma, joined me in the government jeep, to travel up to her village. We reached her home to find she was out: had been away for two days but was expected back any time.

The tehsildar said, "She will come by and by. She is a social activist. That is her work. She will stop and meet people, talk to them. If a person lives in a family context, there is a hurry to get home. Otherwise what is the hurry? What is the hurry for her?"

The tehsildar left. Gurmilan related how Jaggi was very angry with the tehsildar the previous year. She had gone to meet him,

as she often did, to apprise him of some issue troubling the villagers. He ordered tea for her and said, 'Tell me, what is your trouble? If you want I will get 4,000 Rs from the bank and give it to you.' She said, 'Is it your personal treasure? From where will you take out the money? You are a tehsildar, which means you are a servant of the people.' She was so angry she left without touching the tea!

As we waited for Jaggi Gurmilan brought in a fresh papaya, sliced and solicitously served it. He was in an unusually eloquent and expansive mood. After a while Jaggi reached Daudpur in the tehsildar's jeep. He had found her on the way travelling on Jeetlal's cycle, and sent her back by jeep. Seeing me she exclaimed, "The tehsil is afire with excitement. Who is this girl from Delhi for whom the tehsildar has left his office and court, and is wandering from village to village?.... You have been properly welcomed in the district. I am happy. You have come alone. If anything had happened to you I would have created a protest demonstration in front of Rajiv Gandhi in five minutes! I would have turned the whole district upside down. But you received a proper welcome in Pratapgarh. The DM himself has welcomed you. The tehsildar sent me too in his jeep, saying that a girl is sitting in your house; she will get worried. Go soon!"

In high good humour, she turned to Jeetlal and said with an impish grin, "Jeetlal, now I will not go around on your cycle. Now I will only travel in jeeps!"

Jaggi had visited Jeetlal's home – "His parents and wife were worried – `where has our son gone?' Now they are at peace: `fine, he is with you'." She had visited a lawyer near Devsara to get train passes made; he promised to make necessary arrangements within a few days. She had spoken to the village Pradhan, who promised her 20 bighas of land for a *gaushala* and a Khadi Bhandar.

She had brought her pension – 401 Rs – from Patti. She threw it towards Gurmilan, saying, "I won't keep this treasure." There was no rice in the house, and hardly any salt. Jeetlal went on his cycle to fetch provisions. A neighbouring woman came, in rags, asking for a bit of salt. Jaggi instructed Gurmilan to give her whatever salt they had.

'Where Is Our Portion of Freedom?'

That evening by the light of the lantern, Jaggi mused, "We fought against the white people, told them to leave our land and go back to their own country. We were children of India and we wanted to plant flowers here, with dignity and honour. Those were days of making speeches, and rousing the people. We wrested freedom. Now where is our portion – our portion of freedom? Instead there is poverty, casteism, fights and robbery. Is it for this that we won freedom?"

During dinner she initiated a lively philosophical discussion about honesty and ethics in politics, and about different parties, communalism and religion.... At night, lying on her string cot, she launched into a soliloquy on the notion of the nation, and then started singing a haunting bhajan about the sufferings of Sita: "*Sita bises dukh mein rahin*" (*Sita spent her life in great suffering....*). By the flickering light of a kerosene lantern her voice quivered in the air for a while until sleep overtook her. And then there was silence until the dawn!

EPILOGUE

"Wake up, wake up! We will not win freedom if we keep sleeping! The lazy cannot achieve freedom. Winning freedom is no easy task. We have to work for freedom! Up, get up!"

– Jaggi Devi

Daudpur: 1989: An Ordinary Morning

Jaggi woke to the sound of birds. Across her tiny hut, beyond yellow mustard fields, rose the red sun. Her voice was strong and loud in the quiet morning air. "Gurmilan, wake up", she urged. Gurmilan was already awake, and chopping wood to light the fire. Jaggi continued unfazed, her tone the steady harangue typical of rousing political speeches.



Jaggi Devi: At home in Daudpur Kunda village

Jolted awake in my corner of the still-dark, mud-walled room with its sloping roof, I listened, astonished. Her tone was commanding. The other day she had confided in me, "We have many soldiers." Jaggi was still fighting. The battle for freedom was still alive and kicking.

Quietly, joyfully, Gurmilan was already engaged in his daily work – gathering fodder for the cow, stacking fuel wood and lighting a fire. Lalli had begun preparing the spices for a meal. She would grind peas fresh from their field to make '*nimoona*', knead flour and cook rotis. Jaggi supervised all this, talking incessantly. She loved everybody. There was a twinkle in her eyes – eyes that retained their powers of observation despite all the years they had seen.

'But She Has Gone Mad!'

In her district it was rumoured that Jaggi had lost her sanity. The DM of Pratpgarh, B.M. Pandey[59], said, "Jaggi Mata? Everybody knows her. But she has gone mad!"

Jaggi did do some odd things, like get up early in the morning and start ranting about freedom. Perhaps there was a divine madness about her – a sort of passion that seemed, in ordinary workaday life, to be out of place, and therefore an imbalance. But the DM's classifying Jaggi as mad rejected the possibility of her being a cogent source of comment, critique or history. In fact her critique of 'free' India was so incisive that the bureaucrat-rulers of modern India dismissed it – for their own sanity! They preferred to pass judgment on her, whose honesty and convictions they could barely fathom.

Sometimes Jaggi talked incessantly, the words apparently unconnected and senseless. But if you listened carefully, her words began to make sense. You grasped a method in her madness and a perfect logic in her ramblings. You began to appreciate her unswerving sincerity and transparent commitment.

What Jaggi talked about, mostly, was freedom. Freedom was her major theme, her grand obsession. Her comrades had passed away

– or lost all hope – but she carried on relentlessly. In her own inimitable style she discoursed on the meaning of freedom, what it meant for the nation, the villagers, the peasantry, for women, for each and every citizen. If she was disturbed, if she sometimes raved and ranted, it was because of extreme discord between her ideals and the realities of the world around her.

She had no access to radio, television or newspaper. Her connection with the world was, by and large, limited to face-to-face communication. Yet her interests lay in the wider world: in all-round political and economic welfare. Even her response to the charge (made by various people at various points) that she was going mad was characteristic: "If I am mad, make an asylum for me! Put me in the asylum and look after me!" She demanded nothing less than social security and appropriate welfare measures for all of India's citizens.

Issues at Stake

Jaggi was definitely an 'angry' older woman. A storm of questions and challenges raged within her. She was fuming. She had helped make history: a fact she knew and respected. But the rest of the country seemed to have conveniently forgotten such facts. Few were interested any more in *how* freedom had been won. Instead, their concern seemed to lie in squandering and misusing the hard-won freedom. This was not what she had spent her youth fighting for!

"We fought for freedom from landlords' torture", she recalled. True enough. But although zamindari was abolished, land holdings remained extremely skewed and conditions of labour highly exploitative. She was concerned about sexual abuse of women and had fought for an end to such abuse. But she knew women continued to be violated, and said to me, "It's a bad

world today. Ravan abducted Sita. In the same way if somebody were to abduct you, I would turn the district upside down!"

"We fought for schools", she reminded us. But most girls and boys around her still did not know how to read and write. Nor was she impressed by the kind of schooling available: "I am very angry with the boys who go to study", she said. "They hang around talking nonsense. They have no understanding or intelligence. They spend their parents' money sitting in hotels, sipping tea. From where will the money come for their vagabonding? They are crows – crows! They go caw-caw-caw all day. They laugh at me, they think I am mad."

Jaggi felt betrayed and disillusioned. Her consciousness was moulded in the throes of struggle, amid comrades with whom she shared a vision of life lived with dignity. They had fought for the common good. They struggled for freedom from exploitation and the simple satisfaction of basic needs: hardy clothing, sufficient food, a roof over everybody's head and protection from the elements. They demanded a better life for their children: free, equal and self-respecting. Though the peasantry was caught up in several contradictions, they had the strength of spontaneity, militancy and common sense.

As the struggle crumbled, several possibilities inherent within it also dwindled away. The seeds of radical social change were nipped in the bud. Yet Jaggi remained true to the tenets she internalised in her childhood and youth. Her life had a unique texture in the close interweaving of personal and political elements. Her consciousness, with its several departures from traditional norms and expectations, can be understood only within this double context.

Indian History and Local Histories

In Pratpgarh, they called her Jaggi Mata. From the lowly peasant to the tehsildar, from the DM to politicians of different hues, people knew here. If she was so well known locally, why have we been ignorant of her at a wider level? Was her importance only local?

'Indian' history must include the history of people like Jaggi, and the movements she was an integral part of. At the same time, these histories ought to be accessible to local people. Jaggi sometimes felt angry at losing her most prized possessions – bundles of papers and documents dating from the era of pre-Independence struggles. Being custodian of those documents helped her feel a tangible sense of connection and continuity with those days. She gave away the papers to historians, trusting that somebody in Delhi would pen the *real* histories of those struggles.

As it was, she lost sight of documents that were like living memories to her, and received no sign of writing that could be shared with the people around her, that would somehow make a difference to the way things were. Documents belonging to her were placed in a rarefied space where people like her had little or no access. For the ageing Jaggi this was another big loss, a break with the past that she found difficult to come to terms with. Such documents, and histories written therefrom, should be available at local levels too, in the service of widening and deepening people's understanding of history – including their own histories.

End Notes and References

Introduction

[1] Jaggi Devi, Interviews and interaction in Daudpur Kunda village, Pratapgarh, during May 1988, March 1989 and April 1989, form the basic oral history source for this book.

[2] M.Phil (1987), 'Women's Participation in Peasant Movements: U.P.1917-47', Political Science department, Delhi University

[3] Majid Hayat Siddiqui, 'A Note On Some Sources for the Study of Peasant Movements', Indian History Congress Proceedings, 33rd session, 1972

[4] Historians Siddiqui and Kapil Kumar conducted pioneering research on the Avadh peasant movements. They had met Jaggi Devi, and gathered movement-related documents from her and some others, and deposited these at NMML, New Delhi

[5] The M.Phil program in the Political Science department did not allow fieldwork in those days. My Ph.d (1992) was on contemporary women's groups in U.P. – 'Aims, Ideologies and Forms of Protest: Women's Groups in Contemporary U.P.', Political Science department, Delhi University.

[6] The subaltern studies group, led by historian Ranajit Guha, had begun producing substantial literature in the early 1980s, on peasant and other subaltern movements in South Asia.

[7] Lalita, Interviews and interactions in Daudpur Kunda village, May 1988, March 1988 and April 1989

[8] Ram Akbal, Labeda village, Pratapgarh confirmed this in an Iinterview, April 1989

[9] Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, London, 1936, reprint Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, N. Delhi, 1986, pp 48-62

[10] Chatterjee, Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, OUP, Delhi, 1986 notes that Gandhian

campaigns mobilised peasantry to join the nationalist movement but they were not incorporated as a class force in the structure of the new Indian state.

[11] Gyan Prakash argues that the Subaltern Studies project restores the subject-position of the subaltern rebel, not as a pre-given foundation or essence but as an effect of power relations. See Prakash, Gyan, 'Can the 'Subaltern' Ride?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32 (2), April 1992

[12] Feminist scholarship in India by now has a rich corpus of writings. Books asserting and reclaiming women's agency include Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing*, Kali for Women, N. Delhi, 1993; Uma Chakravarty, *Rewriting History – The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women, N. Delhi, 1998; Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, OUP, 1998; and Gloria Goodwin Raheja, ed, *Songs, Stories, Lives: Gendered Dialogues and Cultural Critique*, Kali for Women, 2003.

Chapter I

[13] Eric Stokes, *The Peasants and the Raj*, S.Chand and Co., N. Delhi, 1980, p 205. There were three distinct tenurial arrangements in U.P. (the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh): permanent zamidari settlement in Benaras and adjoining areas; mahalwari in the rest of Agra; and talukdari in Avadh.

[14] Kathleen Gough, 'Imperialism and Revolutionary Potential in South Asia, in Kathleen Gough and Hari Sharma, eds, *Imperialism and Peasant Revolution in South Asia*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1973.

[15] Ranajit Guha, ed, *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, OUP, Delhi, 1982, p vii

[16] SNA Jafri, *The History of the Status of Landlord and Tenant in the United Provinces*, Usha, N.Delhi, 1985; 1st pub 1931, p 181

[17] DN Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India*, OUP, N Delhi, 1983, pp 1987-94

[18] Kapil Kumar, *Peasants in Revolt: Tenants, Landlords, Congress and the Raj in Oudh, 1886-1922*, Manohar, N. Delhi, 1984, pgs 31-32 lists

cases of sale of minor girls to older men for a few hundred Rupees. For instance a peasant sold his 5-year old daughter to a 40-year old man for Rs 300 to pay off debts and *nazrana* and prevent ejection; another sold his 12-year old daughter to a 60-year old man; and so on. See also Kapil Kumar, 'Rural Women in Oudh: Baba Ramchandra and the Woman Question' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1989.

[19] Govind Kelkar, 'Kisan Unrest and the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1920-22', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol 10, Dec 1975, pp 1987-94

Chapter II

[20] Gyan Pandey, 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh 1919-22', in Ranajit Guha, ed, *Subaltern Studies* I, OUP, N Delhi, 1982, p 148.

[21] MH Siddiqui, *Agrarian Unrest in North India 1918-22*, Vikas, N. Delhi, 1978, p 111

[22] Nehru, n.7, pp 48-62

[23] Budhni Devi, Interview, Bisar village, 1989.

[24] M.S. Siddiqui, n 19, p. 140

[25] Siddiqui, ibid, pp 146-7

[26] Kumar:1984, n. 16, pp 115-16

[27] BRC papers, 1st installment, *Speeches and Writings*, File no. 2A (2) on 'Return from Fiji and Oudh Peasant Movement 1918-1921', NMML, N. Delhi

[28] Pandey, n 18, p 143

[29] Dhanagare, n. 15, p 118

[30] Kumar: 1984, n 16, p 142

[31] Nehru, n 7, p 61

[32] Pandey, n 18, p 143

[33] Nehru, n 7, pp 57-58

[34] BRC Papers, 1[st] installment, *Subject Files*, File no. 4, 'Papers Relating to the Position of Women in the Villages', NMML, N Delhi

Chapter IV

[35] Uttara Devi, Interview, Pehra village, April 1989. Abhilakhi passed away many years ago. Uttara Devi's husband Bhagwatidin died recently and she was bringing up five children with barely any source of income.

[36] Ram Samujh, Daudpur Kunda village, Interview, April 1989

[37] Kumar: 1989, n 16, p 363

[38] Budhni Devi, Interview, n 21

[39] Jagganath Pradhan, Interview, Behta village, April 1989

[40] BRC papers, *Subject Files* - 12

[41] BRC papers, *Speeches and Writings*, File no. 2B

[42] BRC papers, n 32

[43] *Agrarian Distress in the United Provinces: the Report of the Committee Appointed by the Council of the U.P. Provincial Congress Committee to Enquire into the Agrarian Situation in the Province (1931)*, Prabhu, Delhi, 1982

[44] For instance BRC papers, 1[st] instalment *Speeches and Writings*, File no. 5

[45] Kumar: 1989, n 16, p 351, citing BRC papers, *Speeches and Writings*, File no. 2A

[46] Letters dated 24.1.1934 and 14.2.1934. BRC papers, n 32

Chapter V

[47] Baba Ram Chandar papers, *Subject Files* - 11

[48] Baba Ram Chandar papers, *Subject Files* - 18

[49] Baba Ram Chandar papers, *Subject Files* - 9

[50] Sundara Devi, Interview, Devsara village, April 1989

[51] Saxena, Poonam, *Women and Political Participation in U.P. 1937-47*, M.Phil thesis, Department of History, Delhi University, 1985, p 144

[52] BRC papers, n 32

[53] Sundara Devi, Interview, n 48

Chapter VII

[54] Gurmilan, Interviews and interactions in Daudpur Kunda village during May 1988, March 1989 and April 1989

[55] 'Swatantrata Senani Ashrit Sangh', pamphlet, 1989

[56] Kumar: 1989, n 16, p 347

[57] Bhagwandin Varma, Interview, Daudpur Kunda village, 1989

[58] The following sections are based on Interviews with Sundara Devi in Devsara; Ram Akbal in Labeda; Budhni Devi in Bisar; Sitaram Kurmi, Ram Avadh and Algoo Gadariya in Bhavpur village; Mahantlal and Kedar of Pehra: all conducted in April 1989

Epilogue

[59] B.M. Pandey, Interview, April 1989, Pratapgarh

About the Author

Dr Deepti Priya Mehrotra wrote a post-doctoral thesis on *Gender, Power and Knowledge* with the Indian Council for Philosophical Research (1994). A political scientist, she is radically multidisciplinary. Her books include *Gulab Bai: the Queen of Nautanki Theatre* (Penguin, 2006); *Home Truths: Stories of Single Mothers* (Penguin, 2003); *Bharatiya Mahila Andolan* (Books for Change, 2001); and *Western Philosophy and Indian Feminism* (Aravalli, 1998).

Deepti currently teaches at Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi. She is a long-standing women's movement activist, concerned in different capacities with various civil society organizations, and founder-trustee of Sampurna Trust.

This moving portrayal of a remarkable freedom fighter challenges conventional elite and andro-centric historiography. Jaggi Devi's experiences are explored in the context of powerful peasant movements, natonalist campaigns and the dilemmas and contradictions of post-Independence India. This is oral history at its best – projecting authentic voices from the ground with care, empathy and concern for their wider significance.

The author expertly interweaves Jaggi Devi's voice with a range of interviews and documents, including passages from Nehru's authobiography indicating his deep respect for the militant peasants of Avadh. With Jaggi and her chronicler, we visit a number of freedom fighters/ families of freedom fighters in rural Avadh, gaining different perspectives from which to view nationalist and contemporary politics. We learn of specific contributions made by peasant women – the 'kisanins' of Avadh – on various fronts. We become aware of continuities and ruptures, promises and betrayals.

Jaggi's personal and political selves merged in a seamless whole. In her later years, the lone crusader 'Jaggi Mata' was also 'Jaggi Neta': there was no distinction. History comes alive as we journey through the life of this unique figure. Jaggi's unquenchable thirst for freedom compels us to interrogate comfortable positions and rethink issues of agency, identity, gender and class.

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Gender, Culture and Civilization Network

Dr. Madhu Khanna
Associate Professor (Religious/Indic Studies)
Project Director
Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts
Janpath, New Delhi-110 001 INDIA
Phone: 91-11-55361997, 91-11-23389582, 91-11-23381159
Fax: 91-11-23389558, 91-11-23388280
Email: khanna_madhu@yahoo.com
Website: www.ignca.nic.in